

“Jesus Is Anointed in Bethany”

March 21, 2021

John 12:1-11

I. Introduction

Since the next event Luke records is Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem and since next week is Palm Sunday, it seemed appropriate to put our study of Luke on hold for one week. Instead, this morning we will consider an event that happened “6 days before Passover,” i.e., the day before Palm Sunday. The account of Mary anointing her Lord is also found in [Matt. 26:6-13](#) and in Mark—[turn to Mark 14:3-11](#). Luke records Jesus being anointed in [Luke 7:36-50](#), but this is a different anointing. In Luke’s record, a former harlot anointed Jesus in the house of Simon the Pharisee. In the other accounts in Matthew, Mark, and John, Mary, who was a virtuous woman, anointed Jesus in the house of Simon, the former leper. Luke’s event took place in Galilee, while the account we are looking at today took place in Judea.

In [Luke 19:10](#) Jesus said, “For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.” Jesus knew what He was going to go through—[turn to Luke 18:31-33](#). Jesus’ sole purpose was to die for the sins of the world. [Turn to 1 Corinthians 15:3-5](#). Above all else, “of 1st importance,” the Christian gospel is the message of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Later, in [1 Cor. 15:14](#) Paul wrote, “[And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith.](#)” There is no salvation, no gospel, no biblical Christianity without the cross and resurrection of Christ. Jesus knew His death was in just 6 days.

While thousands of Passover pilgrims were preparing for the joys of the coming Passover feast, Jesus was anticipating the coming ordeal of His betrayal, trial, and crucifixion. So, as the Passover approached, Jesus returned to Bethany, 2 miles from Jerusalem, and stayed with the family of Lazarus, Martha, and Mary. Although, as [John 11:57](#) says, “[the chief priests and the Pharisees had given orders that anyone who found out where Jesus was should report it so that they might arrest him,](#)” Jesus’s friends gave a dinner in His honor. Here they expressed their love for Him and especially their gratitude for his raising Lazarus from the dead. In today’s story we see five different reactions to Jesus.

II. Five Reactions to Jesus

A. Martha served. The number of people present at the dinner isn't known, but at least Jesus, the Twelve, Mary, Martha, Lazarus, and Simon the leper were there. Mark wrote that they were at “[the home of a man known as Simon the Leper](#)” ([Mark 14:3](#)); so, Lazarus was able to recline at the table. But although she wasn't at her own home, Martha was still involved in serving the meal. She was motivated by loving gratitude to Jesus and by a desire to honor Him in the way she knew best by using her gifts. Because of her heart, there was no rebuke, as there had been at a previous meal in [Luke 10:38-42](#). In [Matthew 20:28](#) Jesus said, “[The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve.](#)” This is what Martha was doing—serving because of love. Although her work gets overshadowed by Mary's dramatic act of worship, Martha's humble service on this occasion was no less commendable and pleasing to the Lord.

B. Mary worshipped. Then there's Mary. Mary had always been attentive to Jesus' teachings—the three times she appears in Scripture she is at the feet of Jesus ([Luke 10:38-42](#); [John 11:31-32](#); [12:1-8](#)). Because she had paid attention, Mary may have understood and accepted the significance of Jesus' coming death better than even the 12 Apostles had. Mary's anointing of Jesus' head and feet was an act of pure love and worship in anticipation of His coming death and burial.

The perfume was worth 300 denarii—a year's wages—over \$20,000 in modern terms. To demonstrate her love and complete surrender to her Lord, she poured it all out on Jesus; beginning with His head and finishing at His feet. Perhaps if we, like Mary, would sit at Jesus' feet more often we would give more to Him, too. Nard was a fragrant oil extracted from the root and spike of a plant native to the mountains of northern India. Perfume made from nard was very costly because of the great distance from which it had to be imported. Mary had saved this precious ointment in an expensive alabaster box. Perhaps Mary had collected this perfume so that when she died it could be used on her body. But anointing Jesus was more important. She offered her most expensive earthly possession to the Lord in an act of adoring worship. What do you offer in your worship to Him?

The perfume most likely made up a sizeable portion of Mary's net worth. In [2 Samuel 24:24](#) David said, “**I will not sacrifice to the LORD my God burnt offerings that cost me nothing.**” Mary, too, refused to offer the Lord something that cost her nothing. She acted in total love and adoration of her Lord and Savior. The measure of her love was her giving herself completely to Jesus Christ. What Mary did was a blessing to Jesus and a blessing to her own life. She was also a blessing to the home, filling it with fragrance; and today, she is a blessing to the church around the world. Her one act of devotion in the little village of Bethany is an example repeated today as Christians give themselves completely and joyfully to Jesus Christ.

Mary's *actions* shocked everyone there even more than the pouring out of expensive perfume; she “**wiped His feet with her hair!**” The Jews considered washing the feet of another person to be degrading, a necessary task to be done only by the most lowly of slaves. (Remember later in [John 13:1-15](#), none of the Twelve at the last Passover meal in the upper room were willing to serve the others by washing their feet, so in an act of humility, Jesus did it.) But even more shocking than her costly perfume and lowly washing of Jesus' feet was the fact that Mary let down her hair. For a respectable Jewish woman to do that in public would have been considered indecent; even immoral. But Mary was not concerned with the shame she might face as a result of her actions. Instead, she was focused on pouring out her love and in honoring Christ, with no thought about the effect this would make on her reputation.

C. Judas objected. Martha served, Mary worshipped, and Judas objected. The stunned silence that must have followed Mary's startling and unexpected act was suddenly broken by a voice raised in protest. Wanting to appear pious, Judas acted outraged over such an extravagant waste of money when he objected, “**Why wasn't this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year's wages—over \$20,000!**” Judas may have been the instigator, but the others were quick to follow suit. [Matt. 26:8](#) adds that “**When the disciples saw this, they were indignant. ‘Why this waste?’ they asked.**”

Today's Scripture records Judas' first words found anywhere in the Gospels. Unknown until later, Judas was a thief and was in the habit of stealing money from the money box he carried. No doubt, by

this time, Judas had already decided to abandon Jesus, and wanted to get what he could out of what he considered a bad situation—to get some financial compensation for the three years he had wasted on Jesus. Judas' disapproval of Mary's action wasn't because of the loss of opportunity to do more for the poor but to his own loss of more funds to steal from the common purse.

Jesus immediately defended Mary, sternly rebuking Judas and the others, He said, “Leave her alone. It was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial.” In Matthew’s record in [Matthew 26:12](#), Jesus said, “When she poured this perfume on my body, she did it to prepare me for burial.” Mary may or may not have recognized it, but in the anointing she had just done, Jesus saw a symbol of His soon coming death and burial. Her anointing represented the one Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus would later perform on Jesus’ body after His death ([John 19:38-40](#)).

If Judas had really wanted to help the poor, Jesus reminded him that he would not lack the opportunity to do so, “You will always have the poor among you.” The Lord was not criticizing the giving of charity to the poor, but rather He was challenging the disciples to keep their priorities straight. The opportunity to do good to Him, as Mary had done, would not last long. All of Jesus’ disciples need to keep their priorities straight. Sometimes there’s “good” and sometimes there’s “better.”

Judas stood at a crossroads. Unmasked as a hypocrite, pretending to care for the poor while in reality embezzling from the group’s purse, he faced the ultimate decision. He could fall at Jesus’ feet in humble repentance, confess his sin, and seek forgiveness. Or he could pridefully harden his heart, refuse to repent, surrender to Satan’s influence, and betray the Lord. Sadly, he chose the second choice. “Then Judas Iscariot, one of the Twelve, went to the chief priests to betray Jesus to them.” ([Mark 14:10](#))

D. The crowd was indifferent. John wrote that “Meanwhile a large crowd of Jews found out that Jesus was there and came, not only because of him but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead.” The crowd was indifferent. They were thrill seekers looking for the latest sensation—the newest “thing.” They were as interested in Lazarus as they were in Jesus. Jesus may have been a miracle worker,

but spiritually they were indifferent to Him. Within days they would be screaming, “Take him away! Take him away! Crucify him!” (John 19:15). And, finally, the chief priests schemed.

E. The chief priests schemed. The crowds flocking to Bethany to see Jesus and Lazarus didn’t escape the attention of the Jewish leaders. They had already decided to kill Jesus and now they expanded their plot—their hatred—John wrote that they “made plans to kill Lazarus as well.” Lazarus was an undeniable testimony to the power of Jesus Christ—he was a walking miracle. He was also an embarrassment to the Sadducees since they denied the resurrection of the dead and there he stood alive and well. They had to get rid of the evidence. And to add insult to injury, “many of the Jews were going over to Jesus and putting their faith in him,” the chief priests had to act to save their power and prestige.

III. Conclusion

There are several things we can learn from this story. **First, we need to spend time at Jesus’ feet so that we make right choices; so that we can keep our priorities straight.** Turn to Hebrews 12:2-3. “Let us fix our eyes on Jesus.” Unlike Mary and Martha and Lazarus we don’t have to wait for Jesus to come to our house for a visit; we can go to God’s Word—Jesus’ feet—anytime. We can hold it in our hands. We can read His words and think about them. 2 Timothy 2:15 says, “Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth.” Romans 12:2 says, “Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is-- his good, pleasing and perfect will.” If you are going to correctly handle the word of truth, if it is going to transform you by the renewing of your mind, you need to read, meditate, and study God’s word daily—Sunday mornings is not enough time. If you were going to compete in a 26-mile marathon, you would practice every day so that when the time came you would be ready to compete to the best of your ability. If you are going to be the Christian God chose you to be, you need to spend time in God’s word daily. Then you will not grow weary and lose heart; you will understand God’s good, pleasing, and perfect will.

But be warned every time Mary tried to do something for Jesus, she was misunderstood. In [Luke 10:38-42](#), her sister Martha misunderstood her when Mary sat at Jesus' feet to hear Him teach the Word. In [John 11:28-32](#) Mary's friends and neighbors misunderstood her when she came out of the house to meet Jesus after Lazarus had been buried. In today's Scripture, Judas and the other disciples misunderstood her when she anointed Jesus. When we give Jesus Christ first place in our lives, we can expect to be misunderstood and criticized by those who don't know Him at all and even by those who may not be walking as closely with Him. But just like that didn't stop Mary, we need to continue, too. Like Mary, we need to give our all. [Considering what Jesus has done for us, can we give any less?](#)

Second, three things need to be in a Christian's life: worship, work, witness. In this story, we see examples of just that. Martha represents *work* as she helped serve the dinner that had been prepared for the Lord. This was just as much a "[fragrant offering](#)" as Mary's perfume. [Hebrews 13:16](#) says, "[And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased.](#)" Mary represents *worship* and, by being visible, Lazarus represents *witness*. People went to Bethany to *see* this man—this witness—who had been raised from the dead. These three examples represent 3 things that should be in every Christian's life: worship, work, and witness. [Are worship, work, and witness seen in your life?](#)

Finally, no one can be neutral regarding Jesus. Jesus warned in [Matthew 6:24](#), "[No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other.](#)" Everyone must make a choice concerning Jesus. They can be like Martha and Mary who loved Him and showed it in their lives. They can be like Judas and the chief priests who did all they could to do away with Him. Or they may start out like the indifferent crowd but be warned, eventually the crowd sided with the chief priests. The stand each person makes determines his eternal destiny—[John 3:36](#) says, "[Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on them.](#)" There is no 3rd choice—as Jesus said in [John 14:6](#), "[I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.](#)" What have you done with Jesus?

