

The Gospel of John
Session Twenty-Five: Jesus Anointed at Bethany
Commentary

John 12:1-11

12:1–3. Mary’s prophetic act regarding Christ’s death and burial has already been mentioned in 11:2. Here we learn that her behavior was not a donation but an investment, rather like the famous story “The Gift of the Magi.” John tells us that the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. Of course. It remained in Mary’s hair throughout the day. This was an act of worship also recorded in Matthew 26 and Mark 14, but certainly not the same event as the record in Luke 7, though some of the patterns are similar.

Some people struggle with the comment in both Matthew and Mark that the dinner was held in the house of Simon the Leper, but that problem dissolves when we read carefully the text, noting that the location of the dinner was not specified. In fact, the phraseology a dinner was given tends to make us think it was in some home in Bethany other than that of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus.

The expensive perfume is identified as approximately half a liter and it was pure (pistikos), a word not found elsewhere in the Gospels. Morris describes the event in context: “The use of unguents was very common in the first century especially on festive occasions. But the oil was normally poured on the head. The peculiar thing about this anointing was that Mary poured it on the feet of the Lord. This is probably to be taken as an act of utter humility. Mary is taking the lowliest possible place ... The act is all the more striking in that a Jewish lady never unbound her hair in public” (Morris, Leon. *The Gospel According to John*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971, pp. 576–77).

12:4–6. How altruistic Judas seems in this statement—a year’s wages was an enormous amount of money to be used in what seemed like a frivolous way. Soon he would sell Jesus for 120 denarii, just scarcely half the 300 denarii reflected in a year’s wages. Assuming Judas was linking the value of the perfume with the money that could have been given to the poor, we might assume a modern equivalent value of something in the neighborhood of ten thousand dollars. If that figure is even close, we get some understanding of the sacrifice involved as Mary may have used her entire life savings for this anointing.

John developed a biography of Judas throughout this book, and he wanted his readers to understand the motive behind the intervention—greed and robbery, not concern for the poor. This is the only place in the four Gospels where Judas shows himself, but John had been building the evidence already which, when complete, would look something like this:

- He was a devil (6:70–71).
- He was an outwardly moral person (12:5).
- He was a selfish thief (12:6).
- He was a hypocrite (13:18).

- He was the son of perdition (17:12).

12:7–8. Some interpreters find the grammar of this text difficult, pondering what Jesus meant when he said, it was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial. Obviously she had not saved it for that specific day, but within the boundaries of the last week the inevitable “hour” had come. Certainly no one else in the room besides Jesus understood that he referred to the cross, so Mary (like Caiaphas in chap. 11) projected more truth than she knew.

A loose paraphrase capturing Jesus’ intended meaning might go like this: “Leave her alone. In God’s great plan, suffering and death for sin has already begun and this woman shows her love for me at a time when I am already headed for the tomb. As for the poor, taking care of them is a good and biblical act of righteousness and you should do it. However, you’ll have ample opportunity to demonstrate that concern; I’ll be gone within a week.”

12:9–11. Notice how easily theology and politics merge. Rather than being a hero or a medical phenomenon, Lazarus had become a threat to unbelievers because of his life and witness. The evidence of Christ’s truth was inescapable and indestructible. Many people believed in Jesus because of Lazarus. But not the religious leaders, whose anger and hatred increased in spite of the undeniable evidence of bodily resurrection. Once again, John seems to use the term Jews without any negative connotation. We have to assume that the faith identified at the end of verse 11 is genuine saving faith. The expression going over to Jesus assumes a conscious decision to leave the views and behavior of the chief priests and identify themselves with the Lord.¹

¹ Gangel, Kenneth O. *Holman New Testament Commentary: John*. Edited by Max E. Anders. (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2000).