



The Gospel of John

Session 25: Jesus Anointed at Bethany

THE LESSON AT A GLANCE

In today's text, Jesus and His disciples returned to Bethany to the home of Martha and Mary. A dinner party was thrown, and Lazarus and Jesus were the guests of honor.

Martha served the meal and Lazarus dined with Jesus. Mary appeared, broke open an expensive bottle of perfume, and poured it on Jesus's feet. She then wiped them with her hair. Jesus commended her extravagant expression of worship even as Judas criticized it.

As the town drew near to marvel at Lazarus, alive and well, the Pharisees doubled down on their efforts. They not only plotted against Jesus, but Lazarus too.

The direction of our hearts determines the direction of our lives. Martha, Mary, and Lazarus pointed their hearts toward Jesus, and rejoiced in Him. Judas pointed his heart toward greed, and that choice would ultimately cost him his life. The Pharisees pointed their hearts toward death and would experience their own destruction. Direction determines destiny.

TODAY'S SCRIPTURES

John 12:1-11

THE MAIN IDEA

Mary's anointing of Jesus's feet foreshadowed His death and revealed the kind of wholehearted devotion Jesus is worthy of.

QUESTION TO EXPLORE

What would it look like for you to live as Mary modeled in this passage?

SCRIPTURE IN CONTEXT

John 12:1-3 Less than a week before Passover, Jesus and the disciples arrived in Bethany to the home of Martha, Mary, and Lazarus. At a dinner given in Jesus's honor, Mary broke open an expensive bottle of perfume and used it to anoint Jesus's feet. The house was filled with the aroma of worship as Mary honored Jesus.

John 12:4-8 While others witnessed worship in Mary's expression, Judas saw waste. He claimed the money from the perfume should have gone to the poor, but in reality, he wanted the proceeds for himself. When we take our eyes off Jesus, the sinful and selfish parts of our hearts are given room to grow.

John 12:9-11 The Pharisees reaction to the raising of Lazarus should have been awe and wonder. A dead man was alive! Instead, they hatched a plan to kill Jesus and Lazarus, too. The direction of our hearts sets the course for the direction of our lives. The Pharisees had hardened their hearts to Jesus, and they would ultimately suffer destruction and death for their lack of faith.



START HERE

Throughout history, royalty has expressed honor, love, and power through extravagant gifts, gifts so valuable that they become national treasures and sometimes outlive even a monarchy itself. The imperial Faberge eggs, for example, commissioned by Russian tzars in the late nineteenth century, were handcrafted masterpieces made of gold, enamel, and precious stones, and often contained hidden surprises inside. These were not functional items, but symbolic ones, and communicated love, honor, and immeasurable worth.

In John 12, Mary offered something just as extravagant—not to impress the court, but to worship a King. Her gift leads us to ask: *What is Jesus worth to us?*

DISCUSS

Do gifts communicate love to you? What makes a gift special—it's value, it's meaning, or the person who gives it? Why?

REVIEW AND DISCUSS THE TEXT

1. True Devotion Gives Jesus Our Most Valuable Treasure.

John 12:1-3: Six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany where Lazarus was, the one Jesus had raised from the dead. So they gave a dinner for him there; Martha was serving them, and Lazarus was one of those reclining at the table with him. Then Mary took a pound of perfume, pure and expensive nard, anointed Jesus's feet, and wiped his feet with her hair. So the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.

Unpacking John 12:1-3

In royal history, one of the most extravagant expressions of wealth was not a gift *to* a king, but a gift *from* a king; the dowry. When Catherine of Braganza married King Charles II in 1662, her dowry reshaped the British Empire. It included vast sums of gold, but also the transfer of entire territories, most notably Tangier and Bombay. Her “gift” expanded England’s global influence for generations. Dowries like this were strategic. They transferred vast national wealth, and though impressive, they rarely cost the giver personally.

Mary’s gift couldn’t have been more different. She did not give from national treasures or inherited riches. She gave from her personal store of wealth, and quite possibly her most valuable possession. Scholars believe the alabaster jar of nard may have represented a lifetime of saving, perhaps even a dowry of her own.

What kings received from abundance, Mary offered as a joyful sacrifice. And she poured it out, not sparingly, but completely.



Six days before Passover, Jesus and the disciples arrived in Bethany. John reminds the reader this is the town where Lazarus was raised from the dead one chapter earlier. This was Jesus's most extraordinary miracle to this point and the act that sealed His fate among the religious leaders. Martha hosted a dinner party, and John took care to capture the role each sibling played that evening.

Martha served the dinner (v. 2). You may have heard another story of Jesus coming to the house of Martha and Mary in Bethany in Luke 10. At some point during the gathering, Martha went to the Lord and complained, saying, *"Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to serve alone? So tell her to give me a hand"* (Luke 10:40). Martha expressed her frustration that her sister, Mary, sat at Jesus's feet, while she served.

"The Lord answered her, 'Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about many things, but one thing is necessary. Mary has made the right choice, and it will not be taken away from her'" (Luke 10:41-42). Jesus corrected Martha that the most important posture was listening to and learning from Him. The food preparations could wait. Many of us have heard this story and perhaps have even used it as a kind of biblical personal test. You may have found yourself saying something like, *"I'm just more of a Martha than a Mary,"* or *"I wish I could be more like a Mary, but there's always so much to do."*

You might be surprised to find that this earlier account of Martha and her sister is not found in the book of John at all. This sibling story appears only in Luke's gospel. John first introduced Martha and Mary in John 11, when they sent word to Jesus about their brother, Lazarus. Though he did not include the Luke 10 story, John placed Martha in his story where many know her best—serving others.

John said Martha served, *"and Lazarus was one of those reclining at the table with him"* (v. 2). Can you imagine the joy Lazarus must have felt dining with Jesus just days after His resurrection? In a first-century meal, diners reclined on their left side along low tables and ate with their right hands. Lazarus received one of the seats of honor at Martha's feast. Lazarus sat right beside the One responsible for giving him back his very life. He must have been thrilled!

Mary, however, took the lowest position in the room. John tells us, *"Then Mary took a pound of perfume, pure and expensive nard, anointed Jesus's feet, and wiped his feet with her hair. So the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume"* (v. 3). Servants often bowed low and washed the dust and dirt from the feet of guests in their master's home. Though it was a sign of great honor and respect, this humble work was generally reserved for domestic help. Mary didn't choose the position of honor—she chose the position of worship.

Mary's devotion was intentional. What could she possibly have given the Lord in gratitude for receiving her brother back from death? No gift could have been enough. As David wrote in Psalm 116:12-13, *"How can I repay the Lord for all the good he has done for me? I will take the cup of salvation and call on the name of the Lord."* Mary intentionally expressed her gratitude.



None of us will become accidental worshipers or automatically grateful. We must set out with intention to put our focus on Christ and give Him the glory that He deserves.

Mary's devotion was costly. Mary took a pound of perfume and anointed Jesus's feet. Nard was an expensive and aromatic oil derived from a plant grown in the Himalayas. It was imported, rare, and extremely expensive. We'll read in the next verses that its value at the time was 300 denarii—roughly a year's wages. It likely accounted for her life's savings. In Mark's account of this story, he adds that the perfume was in an alabaster jar which she broke to access the perfume inside (Mark 14:3). There was no taking Mary's gift back. As Charles Spurgeon said, *"She did what she could; and what she did was very great."*

Finally, Mary's devotion was personal and humble. She did not hand the jar to Jesus and tell Him to splash some on His feet. She did not gift wrap the jar and present it as a gift, as nice as that would have been. Instead, she *"anointed Jesus's feet, and wiped his feet with her hair."* Mary took the form of a servant, washing the feet of her Savior, and then took it a step further, wiping His feet with her hair. The posture of her heart matched the posture of her body. She worshiped Jesus extravagantly and personally.

John added an important editorial note to the story, that the entire house was filled with the smell of perfume (v. 3). Everyone at the party noticed Mary's worship, and it had a positive effect on each person present. When God's children worship Him with sincerity and humility, others take notice. In 2 Corinthians 2:15, Paul wrote that all believers are like expensive perfume: *"For to God we are the fragrance of Christ among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing."* Not only does our worship bless God, but the fragrance of authentic worship draws others to Him, too.

DISCUSS

- What details in verses 1-3 highlight the costliness of Mary's gift?
- What did Mary's posture reveal about her heart?
- In Mark 14:9, Jesus said, *"Truly I tell you, wherever the gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will also be told in memory of her."* What "fragrance" do you want to leave as your legacy in the world? How might that desire change the way you serve and worship the Lord today?

2. Misplaced Priorities Minimize Jesus's Worth.

John 12:4-8: *Then one of his disciples, Judas Iscariot (who was about to betray him), said, "Why wasn't this perfume sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?" He didn't say this because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief. He was in charge of the money-bag and would steal part of what was put in it.*



Jesus answered, "Leave her alone; she has kept it for the day of my burial. For you always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

Unpacking John 12:4-8

Royal families have long justified immense wealth as necessary to preserve the dignity of the crown. Consider the Girls of Great Britain and the Ireland Tiara. It was commissioned in 1893 as a wedding gift for Queen Mary of Teck and later became a favorite of Queen Elizabeth II.

The Ireland Tiara was created of diamonds in an intricate design. It symbolized unity, loyalty, and prestige across the British Empire. Its value was immense, both financially and symbolically. Queen Mary gifted the tiara to her granddaughter, Queen Elizabeth II on her wedding day in 1947, and it quickly became known as the former monarch's favorite. Today it's estimated worth is over \$10 Million.

What's interesting is that no one questions the need for the crown jewels. No one suggests selling them and giving the money to the poor. Why? Because the world instinctively understands that we spend extravagantly on something we believe is worthy.

Mary likely gave the most expensive thing she owned in an extravagant display of worship, even though not everyone shared her perspective. While Mary saw an object that would allow her to express love, Judas saw the perfume and thought of dollar signs.

"Then one of his disciples, Judas Iscariot (who was about to betray him), said, "Why wasn't this perfume sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?" He didn't say this because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief. He was in charge of the money-bag and would steal part of what was put in it." At first glance, Judas's objection sounds noble. Why not give money to the poor? That sounds like a worthy stance and something near to God's heart. However, we quickly see that Judas's question came not from a heart of service, but from his own selfish tendencies to steal from the ministry's coffers.

How churches spend their ministry dollars is an important and worthwhile discussion. Balancing the needs of maintaining the facilities, paying personnel, funding programming, and serving the community is part of wise stewardship for any congregation. In considering church spending as well as individual giving, there are a few things to keep in mind:

- Everything belongs to God: *"The earth and everything in it, the world and its inhabitants, belong to the LORD"* (Psalm 24:1).
- God loves people more than money: *"For I desire faithful love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings"* (Hosea 6:6). *"Mankind, he has told each of you what is good and what it is the Lord requires of you: to act justly, to love faithfulness, and to walk humbly with your God"* (Micah 6:8).
- God judges the heart of the giver, not the size of the gift: *"Sitting across from the temple treasury, he watched how the crowd dropped money into the treasury. Many rich people were putting in large sums. Then a poor widow came and dropped in two tiny coins worth very little. Summoning his disciples, he said to them, 'Truly I tell you, this poor*



widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. For they all gave out of their surplus, but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had—all she had to live on” (Mark 12:41-44).

- We should give generously and joyfully: *“The person who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the person who sows generously will also reap generously. Each person should do as he has decided in his heart—not reluctantly or out of compulsion, since God loves a cheerful giver”* (2 Corinthians 9:6-7).
- We should give freely and honestly: *“‘Ananias,’ Peter asked, ‘why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and keep back part of the proceeds of the land? Wasn’t it yours while you possessed it? And after it was sold, wasn’t it at your disposal? Why is it that you planned this thing in your heart? You have not lied to people but to God.’ When he heard these words, Ananias dropped dead, and a great fear came on all who heard. The young men got up, wrapped his body, carried him out, and buried him”* (Acts 5:3-6).

When we look at Judas’s statement considering what Scripture teaches about giving, it’s easy to spot his misplaced priorities. Judas valued efficiency over worship, and his focus was not on God’s glory but his own personal gain. Judas’s pride prevented him from experiencing authentic worship. C.S. Lewis wrote, *“The essential vice, the utmost evil, is Pride . . . it was through pride that the devil became the devil.”* Humility looks upward to God; pride looks inward to self. Judas’s words foreshadowed the deadly path his pride would carry him down.

Judas masked selfishness with spiritual language, but Jesus saw through it. He said, *“Leave her alone; she has kept it for the day of my burial”* (v. 7). Jesus did not want Judas or anyone else interfering with Mary’s act of worship. Her sacrifice was precious to the Lord, and Jesus honored her gift.

“For you always have the poor with you . . . ” (verse 8a) Jesus’s remark did not condone poverty or imply that we should not do what we can to help people in need. Far from it. God’s Word is clear that we are to care for the poor. Proverbs 14:31 says, *“The one who oppresses the poor person insults his Maker, but one who is kind to the needy honors him.”* God wants us to care for the poor, but our service to others does not, and should not prevent us from worshiping God. In truth, serving others in Jesus’s name is an act of worship, and something that should cause us to draw nearer to the Father’s heart.

“. . . but you do not always have me” (verse 8b). Jesus remarked that Mary’s gift was preparation for His burial. He knew the time of His death was imminent. In ancient times, burials needed to happen quicken, before the dry heat of the desert began to decompose the bodies. People carefully wrapped the deceased in strips of cloth and used large quantities of aloe and spices to anoint them for burial. Jesus’s impending death was not a surprise to Him. The wise men foreshadowed his death in the gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh, and Mary predicted His death by anointing Him with oil.

Mary and Judas appear in stark contrast. Mary desired selfless giving, and Judas wanted selfish gain. Mary honored Jesus; Judas looked to his own interests. Mary chose an extravagant act of worship, and Judas stood counting coins. How we live in relationship to our possessions says a



lot about who we are and what we value. Mary chose to give what she had in honor of Jesus, and He said that history would remember her for it. In Mark's version of the story, Jesus said of Mary, *"Truly I tell you, wherever the gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will also be told in memory of her"* (Mark 14:9).

DISCUSS

- *What reason did Judas give for critiquing the gift, and what was his real motive?*
- *Why do we sometimes criticize others' devotion, and what does that potentially reveal about our own hearts?*
- *Where might you be choosing practicality over worship of God?*

3. Rejecting Jesus Leads to Deeper Spiritual Blindness.

John 12:9-11: *Then a large crowd of the Jews learned he was there. They came not only because of Jesus but also to see Lazarus, the one he had raised from the dead. But the chief priests had decided to kill Lazarus also, because he was the reason many of the Jews were deserting them and believing in Jesus.*

Unpacking John 12:9-11.

Through history, royal patrons have commissioned breathtaking works of art to display power and preserve legacy. One example is "The Night Watch," a massive painting commissioned during the Dutch Golden Age to showcase the country's civic pride and influence in Europe.

This work required enormous wealth and was carefully curated to control how history would remember its patrons. Captain Frans Banninck Cocq and sixteen other Dutch militia fighters each paid 100 guilders (quite a hefty sum at the time) for Rembrandt to make the massive 12 foot by 14-foot painting to immortalize their fighting force in history. The patronage preserved what would otherwise have been a large less-than-noteworthy group of fighters. It goes to show how far people are willing to go to preserve their own narrative.

The Pharisees were likewise committed to controlling the narrative. Lazarus had been raised from death—an undeniable truth corroborated by scores of witnesses. Faced with a story that seemed to be growing larger than life, they chose not to respond in worship. Instead, they hatched a plot. Much like Rembrandt's painting, they decided to control the story by force or by finances. First, they would order the death of Lazarus, then they would pay for the arrest and execution of Jesus.

In verse 9, John said that large crowds came to Bethany, not only to see Jesus, but to see Lazarus. This man was the crowning piece of evidence in Jesus's story. If it was true that Lazarus was alive, then Jesus's words about Himself must have been true, also. The Resurrection and the Life stood shoulder-to-shoulder with a resurrected man, and people came out in droves to see it.



“But the chief priests had decided to kill Lazarus also, because he was the reason many of the Jews were deserting them and believing in Jesus” (vv. 10-11). Evidence doesn’t guarantee belief. The religious leaders had every reason to know the Old Testament prophecies. They knew every word the prophets had spoken about the coming Messiah. And yet, when faced with the reality of Jesus, they rejected the very one they had been preparing for.

Mary poured out her treasure and found life. Judas clung to money and lost his soul. And the Pharisees clung to power and descended further into darkness. Jesus’s words to them in Matthew 23:27 take on new meaning here: *“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which appear beautiful on the outside, but inside are full of the bones of the dead and every kind of impurity.”* Lazarus had been in a grave and walked out alive—the Pharisees experienced the Living Word and yet remained dead inside.

Spiritual blindness deepens when truth is rejected. The apostle John felt this acutely. In his letter to the believers in Asia Minor, he wrote, *“God is light, and there is absolutely no darkness in him. If we say, ‘We have fellowship with him,’ and yet we walk in darkness, we are lying and are not practicing the truth. If we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. If we say, ‘We have no sin,’ we are deceiving ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say, ‘We have not sinned,’ we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.”* (1 John 1:5-10)

Jesus is the Light of the world. When the Pharisees rejected Christ, they rejected the very light of God. Their hardened hearts revealed what was true on the inside—they lived in darkness and the truth of God was not in them. As Alistair Begg said in a sermon on John 12, *“Unbelief is not a failure of evidence, but a refusal of the heart.”*

Before we view the Pharisees too harshly, we should consider our own sinful nature. As Paul wrote, *“For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light—for the fruit of the light consists of all goodness, righteousness, and truth”* (Ephesians 5:8-9). Our relationship with Christ and the joy we receive from walking in His light should cause us to experience deep gratitude, not arrogance.

Each person in today’s story had a part to play. Martha served, Lazarus rested, Mary worshiped, Judas criticized, and the Pharisees plotted. Jesus held the place of honor. He allowed Martha to serve from her gifts, He permitted Lazarus to draw near, He received Mary’s worship, and He rebuked Judas’s faulty theology. For the Pharisees, the ones who had darkened their hearts and rejected God’s Messiah, He had no words. His final debate in John 10 had already taken place. From this point on, as Jesus declared in Matthew 23:39, *“You will not see me again until you say, ‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!’”*



DISCUSS

- *Lazarus drew a crowd and led many to believe. Can you remember a story of God's activity that bolstered your faith?*
- *How did the Pharisees plot move them closer to their own destruction? What is the warning for us in this?*
- *How might spiritual pride creep up on believers, and why should we be on the lookout for it?*

DEEPER FOCUS

REFLECT ON THE TEXT

DISCUSS

- *Read 2 Corinthians 2:15. Are you living as the fragrance of Christ or of something or someone else?*
- *Read Ephesians 5:2. How are you walking in love? Where is this a challenge?*
- *Read Hebrews 3:15. While our salvation as believers is secure, there are still times we can harden our hearts to what God wants to teach us. How can we be on guard for that tendency, and what should we do if we sense this hardness has taken root in us?*

RESPOND TO THE TEXT

- Which character in today's text can you relate to most, and why?

APPLY

What might it look like for you to live like Mary did in this passage? What would need to change for you to engage more whole-heartedly in worship?



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