

THE ANOINTING OF JESUS FOR HIS BURIAL
(John 12:1-11)

¹ Then Jesus six days before the passover came to Bethany, where Lazarus was which had been dead, whom he raised from the dead. ² There they made him a supper; and Martha served: but Lazarus was one of them that sat at the table with him. ³ Then took Mary a pound of ointment of spikenard, very costly, and anointed the feet of Jesus, and wiped his feet with her hair: and the house was filled with the odour of the ointment. ⁴ Then saith one of his disciples, Judas Iscariot, Simon's *son*, which should betray him, ⁵ Why was not this ointment sold for three hundred pence, and given to the poor? ⁶ This he said, not that he cared for the poor; but because he was a thief, and had the bag, and bare what was put therein. ⁷ Then said Jesus, Let her alone: against the day of my burying hath she kept this. ⁸ For the poor always ye have with you; but me ye have not always. ⁹ Much people of the Jews therefore knew that he was there: and they came not for Jesus' sake only, but that they might see Lazarus also, whom he had raised from the dead. ¹⁰ But the chief priests consulted that they might put Lazarus also to death; ¹¹ Because that by reason of him many of the Jews went away, and believed on Jesus.

John 12:1-11

Parallel passages are Matthew 26:6-13 and Mark 14:1-11

Jesus is inching nearer and nearer to Jerusalem where he will lay down his life for his sheep. In fact, when we come to our text for this morning we find him about two miles from the city gates of Jerusalem and six days before the Passover. It says he came to Bethany.

Now Bethany was the town where Jesus had healed his beloved friend Lazarus about two months before. You remember that Lazarus died while Jesus tarried in another town. And after Lazarus died, Jesus waited two more days and then he took his journey to Bethany. And when he arrived he found that Lazarus had been dead for four days. And the body of Lazarus was beginning to decompose.

But Jesus came to the place where Lazarus was buried and he told them to roll the stone away. And when they had rolled the stone away, Jesus cried with a loud voice and he commanded Lazarus to come forth. And Lazarus got up and came out. It was perhaps the most astonishing miracle of the entire ministry of Jesus. It was an irrefutable declaration that Jesus was God. It was a declaration that life itself resides in Jesus. It was proof that he was in fact "the resurrection and the life." It was stunning proof that if any creature has life at all, it is at the command of Christ. Because he is God, Jesus can give life, he can take it away and he can call it back again.

Now this miracle caused a great stir among all the people as you can imagine. And it says that many believed on Jesus because of this great miracle.

Then many of the Jews which came to Mary, and had seen the things which Jesus did, believed on him.

(John 11:45)

But even such a great miracle as this had no good effect upon the chief priests and the Pharisees. They huddled together to determine what they should do with this great miracle worker.

Then gathered the chief priests and the Pharisees a council, and said, What do we? For this man doeth many miracles.

(John 11:47)

And when evil men council together in secret chambers, evil plans emerge.

Then from that day forth they took counsel together for to put him to death.

John 11:53

So this is the background. It is now two months later. And Jesus comes back to Bethany. And it says that he came back to the place “where Lazarus was which had been dead.” Whatever the reputation of Bethany before, it was now known as the place where Lazarus was raised from the dead.

Now it seems that Jesus came into Bethany for one last visit with Lazarus and his two sisters, Mary and Martha. Jesus knew that he was going to his death in a few days and so he came to spend his last hours with those whom he loved.

It appears that he spent about five days with them. You will notice that he came to Bethany six days before the Passover. (John 12:1) And it seems that Jesus resided with them there in Bethany during the last week of his life.

On one of the days of his visit, they made him supper. Now John doesn't tell us where they ate, but Mark does. They ate at the house of Simon the leper. Now we don't know much about Simon. It appears that he was formerly a leper. But his leprosy is no longer an issue because he is allowed in the city. Some say that he was the father of Lazarus, Mary and Martha. But this cannot be verified. At any rate, there is a supper and we know that it is at the house of Simon the leper and present at the supper are Lazarus, Mary and Martha. But there are others also at the supper, namely, the disciples and specifically Judas.

As was her custom, Martha was busy serving. (v.2) When it was time to eat, the guests were called around the table. And Lazarus and Jesus and others were reclining around the table enjoying a meal.

Then, Mary came in. This was not the mother of Jesus. This was the sister of Martha and Lazarus. And she came to Jesus where he was reclining. Now Mary had in her hands what the Scriptures call an alabaster box. Now when we think of a box we think of a cardboard or wood container. But, alabaster was a hard stone resembling white marble. It was not so much a box, but it was a container used to store perfume. We might think of it as a stone jar or a flask. And the flask was sealed in some way (perhaps with wax) so that the precious contents could not be spilled.

Now inside this alabaster container was an ointment. It was actually a perfume which our text calls very costly. It was about a pound in weight which would be about a pint in volume. And you will notice that the perfume was made of spikenard. (v.3) Actually, the perfume was extracted from a plant called nard. The spike was the root of the nard plant. And the most expensive perfume was extracted from the root of this plant.

How expensive was this ointment? In verse five we see that Judas estimated that it could have been sold for 300 pence (or denari.) Now a pence is not equivalent to our penny. A pence or a denari was approximately an average day's wage. And so, 300 pence was 300 days' wages. If you allow for Sabbath days and feast days and holidays, it was approximately a year's worth of wages. That is why our text says that this ointment was very costly. An average person would have to work a whole year to pay for it. In our day, the equivalent cost might be \$50,000.00.

Now Mary broke open this extremely costly ointment and according to Matthew and Mark she poured the ointment on the head of Jesus. And in John, she also poured it on his feet. Fifty thousand dollars (in our money) she poured out over the body of Jesus. And she knelt down, and with her hair she wiped the feet of Jesus dry. And the scent of the perfume filled the whole house.

Now when Mary poured this ointment out, Judas couldn't contain himself and he said,

Why was not this ointment sold for three hundred pence, and given to the poor?

John 12:5

It is interesting to me that Judas knew exactly how much this perfume was worth in the marketplace. When the woman pulled out her jar of ointment, Judas began to calculate the size of the jar and the approximate value. His mind went to work like a computer and by the time she poured it on Jesus, Judas had calculated about how much it was worth. This is because Judas was motivated and driven by greed.

You have seen people just like this. All they can think about is money. They are motivated by money. They are concerned with how much money they can accumulate.

And it becomes an obsessive compulsion. And it seems that Judas was overcome with greed and materialism. And our text says that he was a thief. He carried the money bag for Jesus and the disciples. The implication is that he pilfered and stole from the bag. So, he was distraught and angered that \$50,000 dollars would be wasted instead of passing through his bag. Of course, he made it appear that he was concerned for the poor, but in reality he was just a thief. And it appears that Judas began to direct his ire and resentment toward the woman.

But Jesus told Judas,

Let her alone: against the day of my burying hath she kept this. For the poor always ye have with you; but me ye have not always.

John 12:7, 8

By this, Jesus meant that there was a sovereign purpose behind the loving act of this woman. This was not just a careless act of negligence. It was not an act of disrespect to the poor. But it was a loving act with a sovereign purpose behind it. Even though this woman probably did not fully understand that Jesus was about to die, yet, her act was a prophetic act – it anticipated the death and burial of Jesus.

Now that is the historical account of what went on there in Bethany. It is an interesting story. But now let's consider lessons to be learned, and let's consider first,

The Utter Adoration of Mary for Jesus

Like Judas, the world would say pouring this ointment out on the body of Jesus was crazy. They would say this woman was insane. What foolishness to pour out a year's wages and to suffer such financial loss. And there is no way that the world could understand such an act. But you and I who know the Lord; you and I whose sins are forgiven; you and I whose hearts are cleansed; you and I who have the prospect of eternal glory ahead; we understand her don't we? We understand the concept of lavishing all on Jesus. We understand the words of Isaac Watts who wrote the great hymn, "When I survey the wondrous cross."

"Were the whole realm of nature mine,
That were a present far too small:
Love so amazing, so divine
Demands my soul, my life, my all."

Mary understood that concept. The value of the ointment was of no great significance to her. If it had been worth ten times as much, she would still have lavished it on Christ. She understood who he was. He was the Messiah. He was the Son of God. He was her Savior. And so, with no thought for herself, she opened her alabaster box and poured out her fortune on the body of Jesus.

Mary was probably thinking, "O, if I only had more to pour out on Jesus." This exactly expresses the debt that we feel toward our Master, doesn't it? He has called us out from our spiritual grace. He has saved us from eternal torment. And he has given us a new purpose in life, and that purpose is to magnify him; to honor him; to glorify his name; and to pour out our life on him.

Paul put it this way to the Philippians:

Yea, and if I be offered upon the sacrifice and service of your faith, I joy.
Philippians 2:17

When Paul says, "If I be offered," it is a word that means, "If I be poured out." That is, if my very life is poured out for your sakes, then I rejoice. If my life be poured out like a glass of water in the dirt, no big deal, I glory in that.

As Christians that is what we are called to do. We are poured out for Christ, We are expended for him. We "waste" our life on Jesus. Now it is waste as the world sees it, but it is not waste as we see it. And when Mary poured out her costly perfume on Jesus, it was seen by Judas as a great waste, but to Mary it was no loss whatsoever.

Let me say that you may invest your life lavishing service upon Christ which will bring you no earthly reward whatsoever. The world may look at your efforts and say, "How foolish." They may say, "What a waste." But you know in your heart that serving Christ is no waste at all.

This is what it is to be saved. It is choosing to take up your cross and follow him. Faith that saves is faith that gives it all up for Christ.

Jesus spoke to a rich young ruler one day. And the young man asked, what must I do to be saved. And Jesus said,

Sell all that thou hast, and distribute unto the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come follow me.

Luke 18:22

This young man had no idea what a fantastic offer this was. Jesus invited him to come and follow him. He could have been right there with the other disciples. He could have witnessed things never before seen on the face of the earth. He could have been taught by the greatest teacher of all time. He could have had eternal riches for evermore. But look!

And when he heard this, he was very sorrowful: for he was very rich.
Luke 18:23

Here we have a great contrast. Mary thought nothing of pouring out a year's wages to lavish her love upon Jesus. She considered the value of the ointment as nothing compared to Christ. But this rich young ruler went away sorrowful and he considered his money more valuable than Christ.

And I say, How say you? Which is more important, your money or Christ. Which is more important, your life or his life? Listen to Christ.

Whosoever shall seek to save his life shall lose it; and whosoever shall lose his life shall preserve it.

Luke 17:33

There is a kind of preaching these days that asks nothing of the sinner. It doesn't ask him to give up his sins. It doesn't ask him to make any sacrifices. In fact, there is a kind of preaching that promises the world to the sinner. But the Bible says,

Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him.

I John 2:15

True preaching doesn't promise the world, but calls on the sinner to forsake the world. It calls on the sinner to make a choice - not a choice to go to heaven, (everyone would choose that) but a choice to follow Christ wherever that might lead. And for this reason, Mary, in utter contempt for the things of the world, poured out her ointment on the body of Christ.

Do you know what Jesus said about Mary pouring out her wealth on him? He said, "She has done a good work!" I suppose that much of our work that we do is a waste. All of our work that is done for selfish gain is a waste. All of our work that is done with selfish motives is a waste. All of our work that is done supposing that we are buying some benefit from God is waste. But when we simply lavish our love and resources on Christ for the sole reason that we love him, then our work is not waste at all, but it is good work.

So, we have seen the adoration of Mary for Jesus. But also in our text we see,

The animosity of the flesh toward Jesus

Notice how flesh reacts to such displays of adoration. Flesh recoils. Judas by the world's standards was a good man. He was a disciple of Christ. He was a minister of Christ. He followed Christ. But he did it out of fleshly motives. Such people as Judas see Jesus as their road to fame and fortune or a means to a happy life. They do not see Jesus as the end in himself. They want to use Jesus to get to where they want to go. Judas saw Jesus as a rising star and he wanted to hitch his wagon to him.

I believe what happened here is that Judas got angry when he saw a small fortune poured out of Mary's bottle. Judas was angry that this money was not deposited in his bag. Judas got angry because Jesus was not about money. And he decided that he didn't want to follow Jesus anymore. And immediately after this supper, Judas went to the chief priests and asked what they might give him to deliver Jesus to them. (Matthew 26:14, 15)

You see, to the flesh, pouring out a bottle of expensive perfume on Jesus is unthinkable. And pouring out one's life for him is even more unthinkable. And Judas couldn't take it. His flesh rose up against him and he could not resist the world. And at that moment Judas chose the world over Christ.

What a tragic decision he made! Judas chose the world over Christ. Even worse than that, he chose thirty pieces of silver over Christ. He chose to forsake his friend. His very name means traitor. How foolish is a man's heart! Instead of choosing Christ, Judas chose to hang himself. Instead of heaven, Judas chose hell, all because his heart was wicked and he was made of flesh.

This very moment, Mary is in paradise because she chose Christ over the world. But Judas is in hell this very day, because he chose the world. What a waste. Judas' life was poured out for nothing.

But Judas is not the only lost soul in this story. You will notice the chief priests,

But the chief priests consulted that they might put Lazarus also to death. Because that by reason of him many of the Jews went away, and believed on Jesus.

John 12:11

I hope you see the utter insanity of those who oppose Christ. Fallen man is out of control. He is insane and he doesn't perceive his own insanity. Man's greed is out of control. Man is hungry for power and for worldly riches. And he will sell his own soul for thirty pieces of silver.

Lastly, I want you to see from this passage,

The Primary Duty of the Church

The primary duty of the church is to lavish love and praise and honor on the person of Christ. Many think that the primary duty of the church is as a charitable organization. They suppose that all the resources of the church are to be used for the poor. This is how many view the church. They see the church as a Salvation Army or a Red Cross. But the church does not exist as merely a house of charity. The church exists in order to pour out its resources on the person of Jesus Christ.

The duty of the Church is to pour expensive oil and ointment on the body of Christ. It is to lift up the name of Christ above all other names. It is to honor and worship him. Jesus said, "The poor always you have with you; but me ye have not always."

Let me just say that the Church has always been the greatest advocate for the poor. Were it not for the Church, who knows what disasters would have befallen the poor of the world. It has always been Christian people who have shown mercy when no one else would. It has always been Christian people who have built hospitals and shelters for the poor. Our hospitals are named Baptist Hospital and Methodist Hospital and St. Francis Hospital because caring for the needy has always been a Christian principle. If it were not for Christians who knows what state this world would be in.

But caring for the poor is not the primary business of the Church. Caring for Christ is its primary business. Our business is to love and care for him every day. Our business is to lavish him with our praise and thanksgiving. Our business is to gather together, not to honor the poor, but to honor the Savior of the world. Our business is to preach and proclaim and protect and defend the Word of Jesus Christ. And this is the business of the Church. If our business were merely to feed the poor, then we would just collect money and distribute it. But we lavish our resources on our Savior.

Mary understood that nothing is as important as casting all of our concern on the person of Christ. And if we do that, all will be well in the end.

With all that said, this passage of Scripture is ultimately about,

The Death and Burial of Christ

This was a prelude to the death of Jesus. The disciples didn't understand. I doubt that Mary understood. But Jesus understood that in a few days he would be crucified. This ritual of pouring oil on his body was a type which prefigured his death and burial. Look what Jesus said.

Against the day of my burying hath she kept this.

John 12:7

We are about to enter the last week of the earthly life of Jesus. This will be a very gut-wrenching week. It will be filled with great passion and sorrow. It will be filled with pain and suffering. It will be a week of great emotional distress. And in the sovereign plan of God, it was necessary that the body of Jesus be anointed in preparation for his burial.