

TALKS FOR GROWING CHRISTIANS TRANSCRIPT

John 12:1-11: The Lord is Anointed by Mary of Bethany

¹ Then, six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, where Lazarus was who had been dead, whom He had raised from the dead. ² There they made Him a supper; and Martha served, but Lazarus was one of those who sat at the table with Him. ³ Then Mary took a pound of very costly oil of spikenard, anointed the feet of Jesus, and wiped His feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the oil.

⁴ But one of His disciples, Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, who would betray Him, said, ⁵ "Why was this fragrant oil not sold for three hundred denarii^l 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 moneybox; and he used to take what was put in it.

⁷ But Jesus said, "Let her alone; she has kept this for the day of My burial." ⁸ For the poor you have with you always, but Me you do not have always."

⁹ Now a great many of the Jews knew that He was there; and they came, not for Jesus' sake only, but that they might also see Lazarus, whom He had raised from the dead. ¹⁰ But the chief priests plotted to put Lazarus to death also, ¹¹ because on account of him many of the Jews went away and believed in Jesus.

Background Notes

In John 11 we have the account of the raising of Lazarus from the dead. Now in John 12 the Lord has come back to Bethany where that great miracle had taken place. There they made Him a dinner, probably somewhat of a celebration of that great miracle on the Lord's previous visit. In the parallel account in Mark 14, we learn that the supper was held in the home of Simon the Leper. We assume that he was a leper who had been healed by our Lord. Possibly he was the father of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, or perhaps Martha's husband.

It was at this dinner that Mary took some very costly oil and anointed the Lord's feet. Now don't get the idea that the Lord was sitting at a table and Mary crawled underneath the tablecloth, found the Lord's feet and anointed them with oil -- no! In that day people reclined around a low table on low flat backless couches or daybeds, with their heads close to the table and their feet at the far end of the couch. Mary would have had no trouble anointing the Lord's feet.

In Matthew and Mark, where we have the same account, we read that Mary anointed the Lord's head. This is not a contradiction in the Bible -- she anointed both His head **and** His feet in her act of worship. Again, remember that the Lord was not sitting at a table where the oil would have run down from His head on his clothes or on the food. No, He was reclining on the low couch where it was easy for Mary to anoint both His head and His feet, with no mess.

The act of anointing the Lord's head and feet was not unusual or "far out," as it would be today. In that dry and dusty climate, periodically anointing the head and feet with oil was quite common. What was unusual here, however, was that Mary used **very costly oil**. Normally, olive oil would have been used, but Mary used a very expensive imported perfumed oil. Verse 5 indicates that it was worth "three hundred denarii."

That was a typical worker's annual wage in that day -- it was a lifetime savings! That was unusual! Also unusual here, is the fact that Mary used her hair to wipe the Lord's feet. Normally in that day a woman did not unbraided or unpin her hair in public. But remember, this was an act of worship.

One more background note here: the anointing of the Lord by Mary of Bethany is not the same as the "anointing" of the Lord in Luke 7. In that account the woman washed the feet of the Lord with her tears, and dried them with her hair. That anointing was at a different time and in a different place. It took place in the Galilee area, by a woman who was known to have lived a sinful life. The event in John 12 is paralleled in Matthew 26 and Mark 14. This is the anointing by Mary of Bethany during the last week of our Lord's earthly ministry.

Doctrinal / Teaching Points

The human heart responds to the obvious work of the Lord in various ways.

From the Lord's "parable of the sower," we know that the human heart responds to the Lord in various ways. In that parable the different soils represent various responses of the human heart to the word of God. We see that same truth demonstrated here. In chapter 11, Lazarus was raised from the dead -- it was obvious that God was at work. The Lord raised a man back to life that had been dead for four days, and the miracle could not be denied. Here in John 12 we see four responses to this obvious work of the Lord.

First of all, there is the response of **worship, service and communion**. This is the response of the believer. This was the response of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. Verse 2 tells us that Martha **served** the dinner. As you know, Martha is known for her serving. Service is always a proper response of the believer to the work of the Lord. In Lazarus, we see **communion**: "*There they made Him a supper; and Martha served, but Lazarus was one of those who sat at the table with Him.*" Can you imagine the level of fellowship between Lazarus and the Lord who had raised Him from the dead? What a lesson for us -- a special communion we have with our Lord as a response of the Lord's work in saving us! And of course in Mary we see **worship**. Mary of Bethany is known for her worship. All the sacrifice that Mary put into this act of worship was right and proper, and it was accepted and commended by the Lord. Mary anticipated the coming death of the Lord, and anointed Him ahead of time as an act of worship. So, in Mary, Martha, and Lazarus we have the response of the believer to the evidence of God at work in worship, service and communion.

In Judas, we see the response of **selfish unbelief**. This is a response of an unbeliever. "*One of His disciples, Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, who would betray Him, said, ⁵ "Why was this fragrant oil not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?" This he said, not that he cared for the poor, but because he was a thief, and had the money box; and he used to take what was put in it"(v4-6).* Judas had witnessed the great miracle of the raising of Lazarus from the dead, but Judas continued on in His hardened unbelief -- and it was a selfish unbelief. When Judas realized that Jesus was not the political Messiah that he was looking for, he still stayed with the group. Why? Because he was a thief! He was the "treasurer" for the group -- he was in charge of the funds for the group's needs, but he selfishly stole from it for himself. Judas hid behind the pious phrase: "We should give this money to the poor!" What a hypocrite -- what a mask! In a few days, he would betray the Lord for a tenth as much -- 30 pieces of silver -- with no idea of giving that to the poor.

Selfish unbelief was Judas' response to the obvious work of the Lord, and it is the response of many unbelievers today. They hide behind "religion." They utter pious phrases like, "We should help the poor as Jesus did," but if you look at their checkbooks, you'll find only token amounts (if any) given to the poor. And if you look at their hearts, there is no love for God – only selfish unbelief.

Incidentally, when the Lord said "*For the poor you have with you always, but Me you do not have always*"(v8), He was not endorsing poverty, nor was He saying that we shouldn't do anything about it. No, He was just stating a fact that has always been true and is certainly true today: there will always be poor people among us. In this statement our Lord was emphasizing the importance of worship -- even when there are people in need! In the parallel account in Mark 14:7, we read "*For you have the poor with you always, and whenever you wish you may do them good; but Me you do not have always.*" In other words, there is the proper place for worship.

In verse 9 we see another response to the obvious work of the Lord: the response of **curiosity**. "*Now a great many of the Jews knew that He was there; and they came, not for Jesus' sake only, but that they might also see Lazarus, whom He had raised from the dead.*" Were these people true believers? Maybe some of them were already believers, and maybe some of them became true believers, because we see in verse 11 that many of the Jews went away and believed in Jesus. But at this point their priorities are certainly mixed up. Would they have come to see Jesus just to hear Him teach, if Lazarus hadn't been raised from the dead? It seems that they may have come more out of curiosity than out of a true love for the Lord.

The same is true today. There are many people who are interested in seeing and hearing about the great things that God is doing, but they seem to be more interested in the excitement of the great things God is doing than in getting to know the Lord Himself. By the way, this attitude also applies to some Christians – ministries will always get a bigger audience, for example, if the ministry is **experience**-oriented than if it is **teaching**-oriented.

A fourth response to the obvious work of God when the Lord raised Lazarus from the dead is the response of **hate**. "*Now a great many of the Jews knew that He was there; and they came, not for Jesus' sake only, but that they might also see Lazarus, whom He had raised from the dead.* ¹⁰ *But the chief priests plotted to put Lazarus to death also, ¹¹ because on account of him many of the Jews went away and believed in Jesus*"(v9-11). Can you believe it? These religious leaders were not only plotting kill Jesus, but they are making plans to kill Lazarus as well! The work of the Lord was so obvious that they wanted to destroy the evidence.

What hate we see here! In Romans 1:18 we read, "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness." When faced with the obvious work of the Lord, rather than submit, the unbeliever will respond by attempting to suppress the truth!

This past summer our daughter-in-law, who is a science teacher, took a graduate course in zoology. Rather than give credit to God for the wonderful design that is seen in the animal kingdom, her unbelieving professor praised the wonders of evolution for the "magnificent design" that we see in the animal kingdom! God was not even **suggested**! The human heart responds to the work of the Lord in various ways – and hatred and suppression of the truth is one of those responses.

Practical Application

When was the last time you gave "a year's wages" to the Lord?

Mary's act of worship involved giving an extravagant gift -- a year's wages, all in one shot! She gave it **all!** She didn't hoard it for a rainy day; she gave it all -- and the Lord approved!

When was the last time we gave **sacrificially** to the Lord? Now I am not suggesting that we stop properly supporting our families, or stop paying our bills, but most of the time we are not really sacrificing much in what we give to the Lord. There are many worthy ministries to which we could give -- sacrificially -- **as an act of worship to the Lord!** As in this case, **true worship** involves **sacrifice**, and opportunities don't last forever.

When was the last time you gave "a year's wages" to the Lord?