

The Lord is Anointed by Mary of Bethany

John 12:1-11

John 12:1-11 – “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 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 studied the account of the Lord Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead. Now, in John 12, the Lord had returned to Bethany where that great miracle took place. There they made Him a dinner. Possibly the dinner was somewhat of a celebration of that great miracle on the Lord’s previous visit.

The parallel account, in Mark 14, says that the supper was held in the home of Simon the Leper. We assume that Simon was a leper who had been healed by our Lord. It’s possible that he was the father of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus - or perhaps he was Martha’s husband.

During this dinner Mary took a flask of 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 under the tablecloth and anointed the Lord’s feet with oil. No! In that day people reclined around a low table, lying on low flat backless couches or daybeds. Their heads were close to the table and their feet extended out into the room, at the far end of the couch. Thus Mary would have had no trouble anointing the Lord’s feet.

In Matthew and Mark we have the account of the same event. There we read that Mary anointed the Lord’s head. This is not a contradiction in the Bible. Mary 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 dripped from His head onto his clothing or 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 an unusual or "far out" act, as it certainly 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**. Usually olive oil would have been used, but Mary used 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 represented a lifetime savings! That was extremely unusual!

Also unusual here, is that Mary used her hair to wipe the Lord's feet. Normally in that day a woman did not unraid or unpin her hair in public. But remember, this was an act of worship. Mary's heart overflowed with gratitude!

One more background note: this John 12 anointing of the Lord by Mary of Bethany is not the same as the Luke 7 "anointing" of the Lord. In the Luke 7 account the woman, who was known to have lived a sinful life, washed the feet of the Lord with her tears, and dried them with her hair. That "anointing" was at a different time, and it took place in the Galilee area.

Parallel accounts of the anointing by Mary of Bethany in John 12 are found in Matthew 26 and Mark 14. This anointing took place during the last week of our Lord's earthly ministry.

Doctrinal / Teaching Point

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

In the "Parable of the Sower," our Lord taught that the human heart responds to the Lord and His word in various ways. In the parable, the different soils represent various responses of the human heart to the Word of God.

That same truth is demonstrated here in John 12. In chapter 11, the Lord raised a man back to life who had been dead for four days. The miracle could not be denied! Here in John 12 there were four responses to this obvious work of the Lord.

First of all, there were the responses of the true believer: **worship, service and communion**. This is the response of the true believer to the work of the Lord, and this was the response of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus.

- **In Martha, we see service.** 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 picture for us! What a special communion we have with our Lord as a response of the Lord's work in saving us!

- **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, characterized by service, communion and worship.

- **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 he continued on in His hardened unbelief. And it was a **selfish** unbelief. When Judas realized that Jesus was not the political Messiah he had hoped 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! In just 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 that only token amounts (if any) are 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 still true today.

There will always be poor people among us. In this statement our Lord was emphasizing that worship is important - 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 many of the people, we see the response of curiosity to the obvious work of the Lord: *“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” (v9).*

Were these people true believers? Maybe some of them were already believers. And maybe some of them became true believers, because verse 11 says that many of the Jews went away and believed in Jesus. But at this point their priorities were certainly mixed. If Lazarus hadn’t been raised from the dead, would they have come? Would they have come just to hear Jesus teach? It seems that many of them may have come out of curiosity more than from a love for the Lord.

This response is still 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 than in getting to know God

Himself. By the way, this attitude doesn't just only characterize unbelievers. It also characterizes some Christians. Ministries will get a bigger audience, for example, if the ministry is **experience**-oriented than if it is **teaching**-oriented.

- **In the religious leaders, we see the response of hate.** Their response to the obvious work of God when the Lord raised Lazarus from the dead was **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. But the chief priests plotted to put Lazarus to death also, 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 to kill Jesus, but they were making plans to kill Lazarus as well! The work of the Lord was so obviously a work of God that they wanted to destroy the evidence. What hatred we see here!

Romans 1:18 says, *"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 evidence of the work of the Lord, the unbeliever will respond by attempting to suppress the truth rather than submit and acknowledge 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" 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, perhaps her entire life savings - all in one shot! She gave it **all**! She didn't save 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'm not suggesting that we stop properly supporting our families, or stop paying our bills - but how often do we really sacrifice when 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 to sacrifice for the Lord will not last forever.

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