

## Extravagant Devotion

John 12:1-11

Call: Ps 84:1-2, 4; Ps 95:1-2, 6 (NIV)

Scripture: 2 Cor 2:14-16a (NLT)

### I. Intro

Good Morning! My name is Shawn Reese and I'm one of the pastors here. Today we return to our studies in the Gospel of John, in chapter 12.

Scientists tell us how powerful our sense of smell is. Apparently we can distinguish at least 1 trillion different odors. Who knew? Smell is also very powerful in triggering memories. Smells are handled by the olfactory bulb in our brain and immediately go to the region of the brain related to emotion and memory. This means that when you walk into a house where cookies are baking, you can be carried back to perhaps your grandma's house. For me, the smell of chocolate baking takes me back to my childhood and my mom's kitchen. She makes a killer chocolate cake! Scent somehow anchors our memories within us. And, I think the story of Mary anointing Jesus at Bethany probably was anchored firmly into the memory bank of the disciples because of the pervasive aroma of Mary's perfume. Ultimately, this aroma would have anchored two pictures in their minds: the boundless worth of Jesus and the extravagant devotion of Mary.

### Let's Pray

Father, would you fill us this morning with an aroma of your love and grace and mercy.

Through your Spirit, speak your Word to each one of us this morning through John's Gospel. In Jesus' name, Amen.

### Review

As I alluded to last week, chapter 12 is an important chapter in this Gospel. It is the hinge of the Gospel which separates the book of signs, chapters 1-11, with the theatre of glory, chapters 12-21. So, with this chapter, we reach the end of the first half of the book. In this chapter, Jesus is anointed, he enters Jerusalem and then gives his final public teaching. Today of course is the anointing.

### II. The Scene (1-2)

*Six days before the Passover, Jesus therefore came to Bethany, where Lazarus was, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. 2 So they gave a dinner for him there. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those reclining with him at table. (ESV)*

#### A. The Six Days

If you remember, John introduces his book with a week. He now ends the book with a week. Six days before Passover is where we begin this important chapter. Six days means Jesus will be

resting in the tomb during the Sabbath, Easter Saturday. And, he will rise on the seventh day Easter Sunday.

## **B. The Passover**

This is now the third Passover in this book. If you remember, the first one was when Jesus cleansed the Temple in chapter 2. The second one was in chapter 6 when Jesus fed the 5000. And, now this third one. As we have said all along, these feasts were important times of remembering and renewing. Passover, set in the springtime, was one of the three big feasts. And, it remembered the bitter suffering of the Israelites at the hands of the Egyptians. But, it also remembered the power of God rescuing them from Egypt, parting the Red Sea and miraculously providing manna and quail in the wilderness.

The Jews also renewed their hope that God would raise up a new leader like Moses to lead them. And, by the first century, there was a growing expectation that during some Passover feast, that Prophet like Moses would come. And, not only come, but bring with him the same miraculous deliverance that Moses had brought to their ancestors.

## **C. Bethany**

Jesus, as a good Jew, comes to Jerusalem for this Passover feast. At the end of chapter 11, after the religious authorities had decided to kill Jesus, he left Jerusalem and went back into the wilderness with his disciples. Here he returns to the place of danger, to Bethany near Jerusalem. And as any one of us would do to save hotel expenses, he lodges at a friend's house, then has dinner with his good friends, Mary, Martha and Lazarus. We have to understand that this meal was a clear demonstration of bravery on the part of Mary, Martha and Lazarus. If the authorities find out, they would be in big trouble.

Martha, as we see her do so often, is the one serving everyone. I can imagine her spending the entire previous day getting everything ready. This was her thing. This is where she shines. I bet the aroma of the meal was probably wafting through the house the entire day.

Lazarus, on the other hand, is enjoying the presence of Jesus. Don't you wish you could have been there to talk with Lazarus? I can imagine him saying, "Hey guys, I met Abraham and Moses and David, but the best was when I walked out of the grave, and Peter's eyes were the size of baseballs!"

With all the excitement of the Passover feast in the air, this dinner is a warm, intimate, tender dinner with friends. It is probable that this dinner is to thank and honor Jesus for raising Lazarus from the dead.

And, what does Mary do? Verse 3.

### **III. The Extravagance (3)**

*3 Mary therefore took a pound of expensive ointment made from pure nard, and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped his feet with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.*

#### **A. The Devotion**

In the middle of dinner, Mary gets up, gets a jar of costly perfume, anoints Jesus' feet and wipes his feet with her hair.

I think Mary is one of the three most fortunate people in history. All three are women and all three are named Mary. Mary, the mother of Jesus, is obviously fortunate to have given birth to the incarnate God. Mary Magdalene was the first person to see Jesus alive on Easter morning, and was the first person to announce the Easter Gospel. And, this Mary, the sister of Lazarus, who gets to touch and wipe Jesus' feet.

#### **B. The Pour**

For the second time in a week, Mary anoints a man's body for burial, which is how Jesus will interpret this act. In the ancient world, both kings and corpses were anointed. In the Old Testament, anointing the head of a king was done by a male priest. Here, a woman takes the role of anointing Jesus as King, but she anoints his feet. He is anointed as one would anoint a corpse. So, this act by Mary is a prophetic act, preparing Jesus to be a suffering king. Mary seems to get it before everyone else, and her extravagant act prepares everyone there and all of us to read the Palm Sunday story correctly. When Jesus rides into Jerusalem as king, our text for next week, he will be a different kind of king. Jesus will not rule from a throne but from a cross.

Mary anoints the feet. In the first century, guests coming for a meal would get their feet anointed with oil to keep their feet from cracking. Mary is not using this oil. The oil Mary uses is nard, a very rare and precious spice from northern India. It was used in a variety of ways at that time. It was used medicinally, as an aromatic wine, as a breath scent and as a perfume for burial, but only in small quantities because it was so expensive. Sometimes it's mixed with other things, but in this case, John tells us that Mary uses pure nard, meaning it is very expensive. This is not something a woman would normally carry in her purse. This is not something you would buy at Nordstrom on the way to the dinner party. This is probably a family heirloom. What is even more striking is how much Mary uses. She uses a pound of it, think – a can of soda. We later find out it is worth 300 denarii. Three-hundred denarii is an entire year's wages, close to \$25,000 in our time. And, she uses so much, John tells us that the aroma fills the entire house, underscoring the extravagance of the gift.

#### **C. The Hair**

Then, after pouring the perfume on Jesus' feet, she wipes it with her hair. This was taboo in that culture. A woman was never to let down her hair in public. But, once again, this speaks to

Mary's extravagance. She is acting with abandon in her love and devotion to Jesus. She's lost all self-consciousness as she hopes her small circle of friends and family will understand her lack of restraint.

#### **D. The Perfume**

Indeed, the beautiful aroma of perfume which wafts through the entire house, the aroma of life, contrasts with the stench of death of Lazarus. Remember how Martha had protested to Jesus when Jesus said to remove the stone from Lazarus' tomb? She said, *"By this time there will be an odor for he has been dead four days"* (John 11:39). Here, the aroma of life has drowned out the stench of death.

Mary's perfume and her worship with abandon wafts through the entire house. Authentic worship of Jesus is never merely private. It always spills over onto others. Of course it can be viewed in different ways by others as we'll see in a moment. As we read in our scripture reading, it's an aroma of life for some, but an aroma of death for others.

#### **D. Mark 14**

Many commentators link this scene with the anointing of Jesus by an unnamed woman in Mark 14. In that scene, Jesus is anointed on the head. And, the thought is that so much perfume is used that it runs down over Jesus' clothes and onto his feet, where Mary then wipes his feet with her hair. If this is the case, then the aroma of this perfume would have stayed on Jesus' garments and presumably his body throughout the passion week. Even while he is suffering through the floggings and the crucifixion, he might have smelled this sweet smell, and remembered Mary's love and devotion.

#### **E. Our Call**

Just a few verses into our story, and we already sense our call to follow Mary's lead in total abandon for Jesus. Think how much you make in a year. Imagine what kind of love and devotion, joy and thanksgiving, would lead you to part with a year's wages in this way?

But, now, the entire mood of the story changes. Verse 4.

### **IV. The Response (4-8)**

*4 But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (he who was about to betray him), said, 5 "Why was this ointment not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?" 6 He said this, not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief, and having charge of the moneybag he used to help himself to what was put into it. 7 Jesus said, "Leave her alone, so that she may keep it for the day of my burial. 8 For the poor you always have with you, but you do not always have me."*

#### **A. The Coldness**

I am told that when artists draw the first 3 verses, the colors used are the warmest, most tender colors available. Then, we hit verse 4 and the colors turn cold and uninviting.

## **B. The Cold Question**

Seeing an aroma of death in Mary's extravagant act, Judas responds quite negatively. But, his comment helps explain how extravagant Mary's act is. As I said earlier, 300 denarii equals one year of wages.

At first, his comment might sound reasonable and responsible, even quite pious. However, John reveals the real motivation for Judas' comment. Judas, who was in charge of the money bag, was a thief. This is the same word used in chapter 10 for the false shepherds. Judas is a false shepherd. He only wants money. In the ancient world, it was well known that treasurers grew rich by abusing their duties, usually embarrassing their master (Keener, 126). But, we've known about Judas since chapter 6. Back then, Jesus identified one of the twelve as a "*devil*," to which John identifies as Judas (John 6:70-71).

## **C. The Contrast**

The contrast with Mary could not be more pronounced. Mary is extravagantly generous; Judas is thoroughly greedy. Mary is humbly submissive; Judas is arrogantly cold and calculated. Mary is selfless; Judas is selfish. Mary kneels in utter devotion; Judas stands in self-righteous judgment. Mary gives \$25,000 for Jesus. Judas will sell Jesus for 30 pieces of silver, around \$1,000. As one writer says, "together, they serve as vivid illustrations of Jesus' own teaching, '*Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also*'" (Matt 6:21) (Witvliet).

Judas treasured money, so his heart went after money. Proverbs speaks of warped minds leading to conflict, typically because one is looking for selfish gain (Prov 6:14-16). This typically happens when nursing hidden sin. Judas is most certainly nursing hidden sin.

## **D. The Defense by Jesus**

But Jesus comes to Mary's defense, rebuking Judas, verse 7. He knows Mary's heart, that she is genuine. What he initially says in verse 7 is difficult to translate, but it seems he is saying that she had intended to keep the nard for his burial. But, regardless of how it's translated, Jesus connects what she has done with his burial. He is now prepared for death.

And, his rebuke of Judas is a further invitation to us to genuine discipleship and devotion. We should not follow Judas' example, but Mary's. We should turn away from all that is greedy, arrogant, selfish and self-righteous, and turn toward generosity, humble submission, selflessness and utter devotion. We also should repent of those times when we wrap our inner greed in statements of exterior righteousness. That's to be a crustacean, to go back to last week's sermon. And, we should resist the temptation to judge others, especially in our Sunday morning worship who say amen or hallelujah or who "go over the top" in their worship of Jesus.

## **E. The Poor**

Jesus then brings in the poor and what he says brings some tension between personal devotion and social responsibility. What is maybe most important is that in the Greek, the word order clearly emphasizes Jesus.

Jesus is not saying the poor are not important. He is simply saying that he is of utmost importance. Throughout Scripture, it is clear that the poor, the needy and the vulnerable have a special place in the heart of God. From the very beginning, God called his people to care for those in need. In fact, Jesus is quoting from Deuteronomy saying that the poor will always be with you (Deut 15:11). And, the argument in Deuteronomy is that because the poor are always with you, you should give generously and be openhanded toward them. In the book of James, genuine faith is demonstrated through the care of orphans and widows in their distress (James 1:27). To care for the needy is not peripheral to our faith, it is central to our faith! It's a primary expression of our faith.

#### **F. The RSCP**

This gives me a chance to share how RSCP is going. As many of you know, we began serving the needy this month through the Rotating Safe Car Park program. Can I just say how proud I am of this church! We have over 70 volunteers involved who, in twos and threes, are showing up every morning and every night to care for those in need. Our guests have been extremely grateful. And, it is making a difference. One of our guests shared how thankful he is because this is a safe place, and he is able to sleep peacefully at night. Not long ago, when he was parked on the street, someone broke into his car while he was sleeping. He was able to fight the intruder off and drive away, but was stabbed in the process. Every one of our guests, especially the ladies, have been so thankful for the generosity this church has shown.

#### **G. The Most Important**

The care for the needy is central to our faith, but Jesus' physical presence at this dinner party takes priority. In fact, we love the needy not to feel better about ourselves, but because we are devoted to Him. We give glasses of cold water in his name, not our name. And, in our text, his physical presence at this dinner party unquestionably takes priority. Soon "*the Word who became flesh and dwelt among us... full of grace and truth*" would be gone (John 1:14). The unbelievable era of the living God putting on flesh is about to come to an end. Mary got it. Here is the most valuable person in history, and a soda can of perfume isn't even enough to honor him! So, she wipes his feet with her hair. It's as if she says, "My hair is the most beautiful and the most clean thing I have. But if it could serve to magnify your glory and your sweetness, it would be my honor to turn it into a rag for your feet" (Piper). She gets it. Judas does not.

Verse 9.

#### **V. The Danger (9-11)**

*9 When the large crowd of the Jews learned that Jesus was there, they came, not only on account of him but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. 10 So the chief priests made plans to put Lazarus to death as well, 11 because on account of him many of the Jews were going away and believing in Jesus.*

### **A. The Target**

Lazarus has become a bit of a spectacle. Of course he has! Many people were coming to faith in Jesus because of him. The target was now on his back too. The authorities won't just stop at killing Jesus. They must take out Lazarus as well.

### **B. Costly**

What we learn is that extravagant devotion is costly. Genuine love and devotion for Jesus is costly. Of course Mary's action costed her probably some embarrassment, but also costed her an entire year's wages. She probably also sacrificed her future. For Martha, her sacrifice was found in service and time. It was found in "perspiration not perfume" (Hughes, 293). For Lazarus, it was probably his life. As Bonhoeffer said, "When Christ calls a person, he bids them come and die" (Bonhoeffer, loc 256). It may not cost us our lives, but it did cost him his.

Following Jesus is difficult and costly. His kingdom is not of this world, built on self-giving, servanthood and sacrifice. It goes against everything this world holds valuable: exalting self, seeking power and staying comfortable. The world does what is right in their own eyes. We, followers of Jesus, deny ourselves and do not lean on our own understanding. So, following him will inevitably be uncomfortable, difficult and costly.

## **VI. Implications**

And, not only uncomfortable, difficult and costly but much more. Without words but with actions and an aroma, Mary has shown us what extravagant devotion to Jesus truly looks like. Mary recognizes Jesus' love for her and in turn offers back the best she has for him (Keener, 125). She acts with abandon and with lack of restraint. She is generous, humble and selfless. And, her authentic worship spills over to others. But, isn't genuine love and devotion extravagant by nature?

Genuine love is extravagant. Jesus is worth everything to Mary, so she shows extravagant love, gratitude and devotion back to him. You don't count the pennies when you are in true love. When I was pursuing Suzanne, I didn't think about saving money. I was madly in love with her! I didn't go to McDonald's when we went out on dates. I didn't take her to get samples at Costco for dinner. Although her mom still has not forgiven me that on our wedding night, we were so tired after the wedding, we did, I'm embarrassed to say, go to KFC. Suzanne was fine with it because we were so tired and it was right next door. But, her mom still hasn't forgiven me. The truth is that we don't count pennies when it's true love. The love just pours out of us like this expensive perfume is poured out on Jesus.

Yes, genuine love is by definition extravagant. As I move into the conclusion, I'm going to invite the worship team on stage.

## **VII. The Conclusion**

So, here's the question for all of us: Is Jesus worth it? That's the question for us. Is Jesus worth it? Is he worth extravagant devotion that imitates Mary?

The lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

The bread of life.

The light of the world.

The Good Shepherd.

The resurrection and the life.

Throughout this Gospel, Jesus is identified with the gifts he brings to us.

So, is he worth your extravagant devotion?

I think the 19<sup>th</sup> century Scottish preacher, Robert Murray M'Cheyne captures the worth of Jesus well. He says this: "He is altogether lovely. Such infinite majesty, and yet such meekness and grace, and all for sinners... For every look at yourself, take ten looks at Christ. Live much in the smiles of God. Bask in His beams. Feel His all-seeing eye settled on you in love, and repose in His almighty arms... Let your soul be filled with a heart-ravishing sense of the sweetness and excellency of Christ and all that [He is]" (Reeves, 11). Can you see why 1.5 hours on a Sunday morning is near enough? This is why Paul says to offer our entire lives as a living sacrifice (Rom 12:1).

He is worth our extravagant devotion, and if any voice tells you to moderate your love for Jesus, don't listen to it. If any voice tells you to lessen your devotion for Jesus, don't listen to it. If any voice tells you to restrain your affections for Jesus, don't listen to it. Go after him with abandon like Mary! And, create an aroma of life as sweet as my mom's chocolate cake. Amen.

## **VIII. The Benediction**

Receive this benediction adapted from Hebrews:

Through him then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, an aroma of life, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name. Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are a pleasing fragrance to God. Amen.

### **Resources**

Bonhoeffer, Dietrich, *The Cost of Discipleship* (Kindle)

Bruner, Dale, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*

Hughes, Kent, John (PTW)

Johnson, Darrell, *Preaching the Gospel According to John* (Regent College Course)

Klink, Edward, *John (Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the NT)*

Piper, John, *DesiringGod.org*

Witvliet, John, *Christianity Today*