



LOVE'S EXTRAVAGANCE

SERIES: THAT YOU MAY BELIEVE

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John 11:47-12:11

25th Message

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There is much in the Christian life that is paradoxical. For one thing, there is the notion of saving one's life by losing it. Jesus said that dying was necessary; that those who sacrifice their lives for Christ's sake will reap a harvest of character, and they will have influence on others. On the other hand, those who try to save their lives will be left alone. They will end up like the dear woman whose epitaph read:

Here lie the bones of Nancy Jones.
For her life held no terrors.
She lived an old maid,
She died an old maid,
No hits, no runs, no errors.

Several times in his ministry, Jesus stated that principle of saving one's life through losing it. We gain ground by giving up ground. We find love by giving love away. If we think others should be serving us, we have it all wrong. If we serve others for Christ's sake, our needs will be met. It's backwards, but that's the way it is. Jesus said so and he lived what he said. "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many," he said (Mark 10:45). All his life he was dying.

This is hard for some of us because our view of life is provincial. We are protective of our interests. We become acquisitive and greedy. But we have to fight that tendency. We must learn to give ourselves away: our love, friendship, time, resources, money.

If you can give — and it's good to give — then give!

This principle is beautifully illustrated in the passage we will look at this morning from the gospel of John. We have already noted that John was quite selective in his reporting of the ministry of Jesus. As we come now to the end of chapter 11 and the beginning of chapter 12, John is beginning his countdown to the crisis of the cross. Passover is at hand. The shadows are indeed lengthening for the Lamb of God. He is being prepared for slaughter in the temple.

John began his book by recording the first week of Jesus' ministry, and now, from the last week, he recalls three incidents. The first, which we will look at today, concerns a supper held in Jesus' honor at Bethany; the second, our Lord's triumphal entry into Jerusalem (when he fulfilled the prophecies of Zechariah concerning the King of the Jews); the third, his reaction to a visiting group of Greeks who asked to see him while he was in

the city to celebrate his last Passover feast. These three things, the anointing, the triumphal entry, and the conversation with the Greeks, all point unmistakably to the Passion: the *anointing* for his death; the *approach* of his death as he enters Jerusalem; and the *meaning* of his death, set out in the conversation with the Greeks.

All three incidents led to polarization between belief and unbelief among the Jews. There are only two possible responses to Jesus' claim that he is the Son of God: you either believe it or you don't. Here John is bringing things to a conclusion. According to 11:45-46, there were two reactions to Lazarus' resurrection: some believed in Jesus, but most did not. Those who did not scurried to the officials to report what he had done. John reports that the chief priests and Pharisees then convened a council and sentenced Jesus to death. This is where we pick up the story this morning.

We might note that the chief priests were Sadducees. Normally, the Pharisees would have nothing to do with them. These were odd bedfellows indeed. For these two to unite would be like the John Birch Society and the ACLU coming together to work on a project. But now these disparate groups unite in their hatred of Jesus. Verse 47:

Therefore the chief priests and the Pharisees convened a council, and were saying, "What are we doing? For this man is performing many signs. If we let Him {go on} like this, all men will believe in Him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation." But a certain one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, "You know nothing at all, nor do you take into account that it is expedient for you that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation should not perish." Now this he did not say on his own initiative; but being high priest that year, he prophesied that Jesus was going to die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but that He might also gather together into one the children of God who are scattered abroad. So from that day on they planned together to kill Him. Jesus therefore no longer continued to walk publicly among the Jews, but went away from there to the country near the wilderness, into a city called Ephraim; and there He stayed with the disciples.

Israel's leaders feared that those who followed Jesus would revolt against Rome and the empire would strike

back and destroy their temple and nation. Caiaphas, however, who was high priest at that time, with typical rudeness ("You don't know anything at all!" he snapped) set them straight. "Nothing need happen to us," he assured them. "All we have to do is arrange for 'one man to die for the nation.'" It was either the Jews or Jesus. Obviously, Jesus had to go. It was a matter of political expediency. They decided to kill him, and so they issued a warrant for his arrest.

With historical hindsight, John notes the irony in Caiaphas' "prediction." The high priest was an unwitting and unwilling prophet. Jesus did indeed die for the nation of Israel. And not for the nation alone but, as John points out, that he might also "gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad." He was referring to us right here in Silicon Valley! We got in on the deal.

So the die was cast. Although Jesus continued to elude the Jews, it was only a matter of time before they caught up with him. We are not told how he learned of the plot. Perhaps the Pharisee, Nicodemus, who served on the council, got word to him. But the time was not right for him to die. It was not yet Passover. Things remained to be done, and so he fled to Ephraim, on the edge of the Judean wilderness, and remained there with his disciples until the feast.

We have already referred to the fact that Jesus orchestrated his own death. The Jews didn't want to kill him on the Passover since it was a festive occasion. They probably planned to put him in jail until after the festival and then place him on trial. But Jesus forced their hand. He himself was responsible for the so-called "Passover Plot."

Verse 55:

Now the Passover of the Jews was at hand, and many went up to Jerusalem out of the country before the Passover, to purify themselves. Therefore they were seeking for Jesus, and were saying to one another, as they stood in the temple, "What do you think; that He will not come to the feast at all?" Now the chief priests and the Pharisees had given orders that if anyone knew where He was, he should report it, that they might seize Him.

We are fascinated with famous people, aren't we? We want to "eyeball" them. If we have ever met ever someone famous, we never forget the moment. People will go to all kinds of lengths to catch a glimpse of some notable. If Michael Jordan or Charles Barkley were here this morning, then we would really have a parking problem!

The Jews were fascinated with Jesus. Obviously, this was what motivated many of them to come to Jerusalem. Josephus, the Jewish historian, records that as many as three million people thronged the city for the Passover week. Jesus' name was on every mind and every tongue. Jerusalem and the villages around were buzzing with the news of how he had raised a man who had been four days in the tomb. Pilgrims were pouring into the Holy

City and adding their own testimony about him. Was this man really the Messiah who would deliver Israel from Roman oppression and usher in the golden age of peace and prosperity? Such questions had to be whispered, however, because Jesus was regarded as a criminal. Concealing his whereabouts was a punishable offense. Still, everyone wanted to see him. But they doubted (as the Greek text indicates) he would show up. He would hardly come to the feast, would he? No, not when the chief priests and Pharisees had given orders to the pilgrims to turn him in should he appear.

The opening verses of chapter 12 contrast with the closing verses of chapter 11. The hostility and hatred of the chief priests and Pharisees toward Jesus is set against the hospitality and love of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus for their Lord. Verse 1:

Jesus, therefore, six days before the Passover, came to Bethany where Lazarus was, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. So they made Him a supper there, and Martha was serving; but Lazarus was one of those reclining {at the table} with Him. Mary therefore took a pound of very costly perfume of pure nard, and anointed the feet of Jesus, and wiped His feet with her hair; and the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.

The other gospels add details to the story not found in John's report. It seems a dinner was given in Jesus' honor in Bethany. (Matthew reports that the function was held at the house of Simon the leper. We have no more information about this man, but he must have been a leper whom Jesus had healed, otherwise no one would have entered his house. Some say the leper was Lazarus' father, but that's mere conjecture; we don't know who he was. Simon isn't mentioned at all in the story; only Jesus' three friends, Martha, Lazarus and Mary, in that order.)

Martha was in her element. Even though she was a guest in Simon's home, she took charge of the kitchen and the service, as usual. Martha was an energetic, active woman. Bright and aggressive, she was always going full tilt, bustling about, speaking her mind. She was a good Jewish mother. She was probably like the woman depicted in the little poem Ray Stedman used to quote,

There's a gladness in her gladness when she's glad,
And a sadness in her sadness when she's sad.
But the gladness in her gladness,
And the sadness in her sadness,
Is nothing like her madness when she's mad!

Martha gets a lot of bad press for her hyper-activity, but that was her way. She was filled with love for her Lord and wanted to serve him. Putting feelings into words didn't come easy for her, however. She let her hot biscuits do the talking. There was great joy in her preparations this day; nothing was too good for Jesus.

So Martha was serving, and Lazarus was fellowshiping. He was reclining at the table, "with" Jesus. He was content to be next to him, listening to him, enjoying his

powerful presence. But Mary shocked everyone. Verse 3:

Mary therefore took a pound of very costly perfume of pure nard, and anointed the feet of Jesus, and wiped His feet with her hair; and the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.

Nard ("spikenard" here) was an oil that was pressed from the root and stems of certain aromatic herbs. Imported into Israel from India, the oil was put up in alabaster flasks and used by women as perfume. On special occasions it was used to perfume a room. Nard was very expensive. (Later in the passage, Judas reveals that the amount used by Mary was worth 300 denarii. A denarii was equivalent to day's wage. In today's terms, therefore, calculated at wages of only \$8.00 an hour, the ointment would have been worth almost \$20,000 — a year's wages.) Normally, a drop or two of this oil would suffice, but Mary opened the flask of nard and lavishly poured the entire contents on Jesus' feet (the other gospel writers say his head as well), and wiped his feet with her hair. John notes (he was present in the room at the time) that the fragrance of the perfume filled the entire house. The aroma of the nard would, in fact, have been overpowering. The scents of the cooked lamb and herbs would have been lost in the aroma of the sweet ointment.

Mary immediately got everyone's attention! Her display of affection was startling, for several reasons. It was the servants' task to anoint feet. Women of noble stature (and Mary must have been wealthy) did not wash people's feet. What a startling display of humility! Second, Jewish women normally didn't let their hair down in public. That would be an unthinkable act in that society. Mary's lack of self-consciousness was startling. Furthermore, to pour out \$20,000 worth of perfume on someone's feet was an absolutely unwarranted display of extravagance. It's one thing to buy a \$20,000 Neiman Marcus fur-lined bathtub (we call that conspicuous consumption), but quite another thing to throw away \$20,000 worth of perfume on somebody else. That's what we call just plain stupid.

At least Judas thought so. Verse 4:

But Judas Iscariot, one of His disciples, who was intending to betray Him, said, "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii, and given to poor [people]?"

Judas was scandalized by Mary's extravagance. The other gospel writers add that the disciples (perhaps John as well) took up his cause. They, too, were incensed at what they considered an extremely wasteful act. They got on Mary's case. It's significant that John didn't launch into a tirade against Judas at this point. He does note that Judas was "one of his *disciples* who was intending to *betray* him" — a significant juxtaposition of words.

However, in verse 6, John, from the perspective of a later date, records some inside information:

Now he said this, not because he was concerned about the poor, but because he was a thief, and as he had the money box, he used to pilfer what was put into it.

Judas didn't care about the poor; he was thinking only of himself. He planned to steal the money. According to John, the treasurer's hand had been in the till all along. Although there never was much cash in the drawer, he was stealing money and saving it for a piece of land he wanted to buy. At the time he betrayed Jesus he lacked only thirty pieces of silver to complete the transaction, and that was the amount he contracted for. But here he perceived that he had missed a gilt-edged opportunity. The equivalent of \$20,000 would certainly have put him over the top!

But Jesus comes to Mary's defense. Verse 7:

Jesus therefore said, "Let her alone, in order that she may keep it for the day of My burial. For the poor you always have with you, but you do not always have Me." The great multitude therefore of the Jews learned that He was there; and they came, not for Jesus' sake only, but that they might also see Lazarus, whom He raised from the dead. But the chief priests took counsel that they might put Lazarus to death also; because on account of him many of the Jews were going away, and were believing in Jesus.

What a strange thing for our Lord to say! Let's analyze it. Jesus wasn't endorsing poverty; neither was he encouraging indifference to the poor. Rather he was saying that Mary and the other disciples had only a limited opportunity to show their love for him. "Leave her alone," he said, in effect, "she knows what she's doing. She has saved this perfume to prepare my body for death."

Mary understood what was going on. She had more theological sophistication than all the rest of the disciples put together. She alone made the connection between the plot to kill Jesus and the Passover. The disciples missed it by a mile. She saw him flirt with death in and around Jerusalem as he eluded capture and then set his face to be in Jerusalem where he would meet certain death on the Passover. Everything fell into place. She put two and two together and came up with the right number. She realized that he was the Passover sacrifice, the Lamb who would die and for all time take away the sins of the world, who would in fact take away *her* sin, and her heart overflowed with love for him. Since no one else would anoint him King, she would. Then he would enter Jerusalem as the Anointed King. She correctly concluded that Jesus was worth anything and everything she had.

Some people are like that to us, aren't they? They are worth everything. Many of us can think back to our courting days when we lavished gifts that we could ill afford on our sweethearts because of our love for them. Money is nothing compared to a loved one. I would sell everything I have to ransom my wife Kathy or my three children from a kidnapper. What is money compared to a loved one?

Mary is reminding us that worthy is our Lord. My prayer is that we would respond to him, not with the prudence of the disciples, but with the extravagance of Mary. May we see all our possessions illumined by his presence, remembering that their true worth is determined by how they honor him. May we learn to truly value those whom God has entrusted to our care.

What is money compared to a loved one? When we are tempted to cling to our alabaster jars, may we remember the precious jar he broke for us, and in the fragrance of that thought, may we fall at his feet, lavishing upon him not only our treasures, but our tears.

How worthy is our Lord! He is worth everything and anything. "Worthy is the Lamb that was slain," sing the angels in the book of Revelation. Judas had it wrong. He was one of those people who knew the cost of everything and the value of nothing. Mary had it right. She recog-

nized the inestimable value of Jesus. Her extravagant act did not spring from dull sentiment. It was a loving action, prompted by her profound understanding of his worth. She would have sung, with George Beverly Shea,

*I'd rather have Jesus than silver or gold;
I'd rather be His than have riches untold;
I'd rather have Jesus than houses or lands.
I'd rather be led by his nail-pierced hand
Than to be the king of a vast domain
Or be held in sin's dread sway.
I'd rather have Jesus than anything
This world affords today.*

If you can give — and it's good to give — then give!

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