

## Extravagant Adoration or Extreme Disdain

Then, six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, where Lazarus was who had been dead, whom He had raised from the dead. <sup>2</sup> There they made Him a supper; and Martha served, but Lazarus was one of those who sat at the table with Him. <sup>3</sup> 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. <sup>4</sup> But one of His disciples, Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, who would betray Him, said, <sup>5</sup> "Why was this fragrant oil not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?" <sup>6</sup> 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. <sup>7</sup> But Jesus said, "Let her alone; she has kept this for the day of My burial. <sup>8</sup> For the poor you have with you always, but Me you do not have always." (John 12:1–8)

It's a strange thing that the most important things in the world don't have much practical use. Think of the beauty of nature. To see a glorious sunset, a majestic mountain, a spectacular animal doesn't serve some utility. You can't pickle and can the experience of beauty and sell it. Take goodness. Doing a good thing, the right thing, isn't always practical – helping the aged, the sick, the orphan, the bereaved. We don't do it to get rich, or become famous, or be powerful, and indeed if you do it for those reasons, people regard you as a mercenary. You do good because it is good, not for utilitarian reasons.

And perhaps the greatest of these practically useless things is love. We love not for utilitarian reasons, but simply because we delight to, because we must. Adoring, admiring, delighting, desiring is not for some mechanical, practical benefit, but because we delight in what is beautiful and valuable. Oscar Wilde said many false things, but this statement is true: "Put usefulness first, and you lose it. Put beauty first, and what you do will be useful forever."

That's true in the life of a believer. At the heart of the Christian life is love. We love God because He is the most Beautiful being of all, because He first loved us. We don't love Him to get rich, or escape Hell, or be more lucky. We don't love Him because loving Him is somehow useful for our own purposes. We love Him because He is lovely. Of course, plenty of practical, useful things emerge out of Christian worship. But loving God is not a means to some other end. Loving Him is the end.

A real believer understands that. Believers live in glad gratitude towards Jesus, a gratitude that unbelievers do not understand, and even find repulsive. That's the scene that greets us here in John 12. We have two main actors here: Mary, and Judas. Mary has chosen the practically useless act of loving the Lord Jesus. Judas has chosen the rigidly practical approach. Who is right?

Answering this is important for your and my life now. It helps you identify if you are in the faith, if you have the heart of a believer. It helps clarify what your priorities should be. We'll see the contrast between Mary's extravagant devotion and Judas' extreme disdain. Then we'll listen to the Lord judge between these with His declaration.

### I. Mary's Extravagant Devotion

<sup>1</sup> Then, six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, where Lazarus was who had been dead, whom He had raised from the dead. <sup>2</sup> There they made Him a supper; and Martha served, but Lazarus was one of those who sat at the table with Him. <sup>3</sup> 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.

The countdown begins to the most significant week in the life of the Lord's Incarnation: the Passover where He will be the Lamb which takes away the sin of the world. Since Passover was celebrated over two days in the first century, a Galilean one on the Thursday, and a Judean one on the Friday, six days before brings us to Friday or Saturday.

Jesus comes back to Bethany, to celebrate a meal with Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. This may have been a meal in honour of Lazarus, a thanksgiving meal for what the Lord had done for them. We read in Matthew and Mark that the house they were in was owned by someone named Simon the leper, which may have been a relative of Mary, Martha and Lazarus, or a friend with a large enough house for this event.

They make Jesus a supper, and characteristically, Martha is serving. That may mean this was not a Sabbath dinner, but some kind of serving had to take place on Sabbath, so it is possibly a Shabbat meal. John makes sure to mention that one of those eating at the table, was the formerly dead Lazarus.

When you hear sitting at the table, you might imagine an elevated dining room table with chairs, and everyone seated around it. But that is not how they ate. Instead, imagine tables only a few centimetres off the floor. To sit at this table meant to recline, usually on your left side, with your body almost perpendicular to the table, feet away from it, eating with your right hand. Tables were arranged in a kind of upside down U-shape, so that servants could move in between people and serve the food. People are lying on comfortable cushions, and of course their shoes are off, their feet have been washed when they came in. That arrangement helps us understand what happens next.

We read that Mary took some perfume. Our Gospel writer actually uses four words to describe what this perfume was. First, the weight of it is described as a pound, which is the Greek word *litra*, which was a Roman pound, which in our weights and measures is around 350 grams, or more or less, 350 millilitres, about the amount in our average cans.

The next word is *muron*, meaning perfumed ointment. Specifically, John says it is spikenard. This is perfume made from the nard plant which grows mostly in India. John tells us it was pure, refined, and says it was very costly. The only time this word is used in the New Testament outside this time is when Jesus in His parable speaks of the pearl of great price.

How costly was this? We find out from Judas' complaint that it could have been sold for three hundred denarii. We remember in Jesus' parable of the labourers hired at different times in the day that a day labourer could earn one denarius per day. So three hundred denarii, if you subtract 52 Sabbaths and a few others holidays from 365 basically gives you 300 days work. This is a year's salary for a manual labourer. This is a lot of money. It's a lot of money for perfume.

Even by today's standards, let's imagine we pay a day labourer in South Africa 300 Rand. Now multiply that over 300 days of work, and you have R90 000. In richer countries, like the U.S minimum wage is about \$100 a day, so that would convert to \$30 000 or R600 000. Now perfumes are expensive, but few perfumes cost R90 000, or R600 000. This is a lot of money in a small jar.

The typical jar was ceramic or glass, had a long neck which allowed you to regulate how much came out. The account in Matthew and Mark tell us that hers was an alabaster flask. Now what does she do? She breaks the long neck, because she intends to use all of it. John tells us she anointed His feet, because John is emphasising her humility. But Matthew and Mark inform us that she actually began at his head, as the anointing of a king, and likely steadily poured the liquid from head to toe. Again, if you understand how they reclined, you can see how she could have done this.

Then she does something even more humbling and servantlike, especially for a woman who was no doubt very wealthy, if she could afford perfume like this. Hebrew women almost universally

covered their heads and bound up their hair. She would have had to untie her hair, and then used it to wipe any excess perfume still on Jesus's feet. This was a humiliating act, an act of being like the slave, washing the feet, as we'll see in chapter 13.

Now just as an aside, while Matthew and Mark record this, we must not confuse this account with the one in Luke 7:36-50, where a former harlot anointed Jesus in the house of a Pharisee named Simon. Mary was a virtuous woman, and she anointed Jesus in the house of Simon the (former) leper (Mark 14:3). The Luke 7 event took place in Galilee, while the account we are now considering occurred in Judea. In Luke 7, she is weeping and wiping her tears off his feet with her hair, here Mary is not weeping. In fact, the two accounts show us that this act of using the hair to wipe feet was perhaps fairly symbolic in the culture.

The fragrance of the perfume fills the whole house.

What is the meaning of Mary's act? She clearly planned this out. She clearly calculated the cost. She understood how it might be wrongly perceived by others. What is she doing?

We don't know if Mary understood that Jesus was going to die and rise. Jesus goes on to say that her act will serve a purpose in His burial, but likely she was not thinking of that. Probably, she wanted to formally and publicly anoint Him with the most expensive thing she could get. She wanted to publicly express how much she treasured and valued Him.

This is an act of extravagant, selfless, sacrificial worship. At cost to herself, she wants to bless the Lord Jesus and express how much she esteemed Him. Mary is showing us the heart of worship: costly adoration. David was once offered land for free on which to build the Temple, but he said, I will not offer to God that which costs me nothing. Paul says that in light of the mercies of God, the reasonable, rational response is to offer our bodies as a living sacrifice to God as our spiritual worship. In other words, our lives. The writer of Hebrews calls our thanksgiving to God the sacrifice of praise.

Worship is where we put a price tag on God. We display by our words, our deeds, our actions how much we think God is worth. That's where the word comes from: worth-ship.

It is no small thing if God's people are indifferent to God's value. It is no small thing if God's people treat Him as being low in value. Like the priests in Malachi's day who brought animals that were bruised and lame, animals that no one wanted; mere leftovers. To give your leftovers always means you've given your best to someone else, someone you really value.

So what does extravagant devotion look like? Well, like Mary's, it is always a response to grace. It is not something we invent or create or initiate. We reflect on who God is and what He has done for us. You meditate on what your life would be apart from God. You think of His salvation, His promises, His provision, His protection, His presence. What wells up in you is the desire to respond to that in ways that express your love, the way a man buys something expensive and precious for his wife or wife to be to express how much he values her. The costliness to you might be in time. It cost Mary time to plan this out, to get the perfume, to plan how she would do this. Time sacrifice: serving when you are tired, or when it's inconvenient, or takes over personal time, family time, holiday time, time you could be earning; but you give that time to being in the Word, or prayer, or coming to church to worship or be disciplined, or serving others, or doing ministry. The costliness might be in money: it cost Mary plenty of money she could have spent on herself. This can be giving to the church and missions, being hospitable to others, spending your petrol money, buying books or Bible for others, taking believers out for spiritual conversations, investing in Christian

education for yourself and your children. The costliness might be in your reputation. Mary knew that she might be criticised for this. People might suspect her motives; people might think it was unseemly for her to do this with her hair. Costly adoration means people think you've become a fanatic, or that you've lost your reasonableness, or that you've become too extreme. It means being willing to be embarrassed in front of old friends, relatives, as you pray out loud, and sing hymns to Christ, and speak about the saving gospel.

But Mary embraced the cost because Christ was worth more to her than everything she could spend. If, as the Psalmist says, His lovingkindness is better than life, then what is not worth spending on Him? The missionary C. T. Studd said, "If Jesus Christ be God and died for me, then no sacrifice can be too great for me to make for Him.

But unfortunately, this extravagant devotion was not the only sentiment in the room. There was a very different sentiment present as well.

## **II. Judas's Extreme Disdain**

<sup>4</sup> But one of His disciples, Judas Iscariot, Simon's *son*, who would betray Him, said, <sup>5</sup> "Why was this fragrant oil not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?" <sup>6</sup> 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.

This is the first time that Judas Iscariot speaks up in the Gospel of John. It is not to commend Mary for her sacrifice, or speak well of her service. It is not to even ask the Lord Jesus what He thinks of her act. Instead, it is to pass judgement: this was the wrong way to use that perfume.

In fact, Matthew and Mark tell us some additional words. Mark says, "they criticised her harshly". Her moment of worship turned into jeers and complaints. One said, "Why this waste?" That's the estimation of her costly, extravagant service: a waste. A waste is the very opposite of a sacrifice. Sacrifice is high cost for something that is worth it. Waste is high cost for something that is not.

Judas has one of those minds of raw pragmatism that can only see the point of something if it has utility, practical, measurable benefits. Sprinkling Jesus with expensive perfume from head to toe has no practical benefit for the world, says Judas. On the other hand, we could have sold it for 300 denarii and given the poor money, or bought them food and clothing. On the surface, Judas sounds more righteous than Mary. Judas sounds like a man who wants maximum ministry for more people.

But behind this seeming righteousness is actually a heart of cold disdain. Judas has no sympathy for acts of adoration for Christ, because he has none. Loveless people are turned off by the love of others. It nauseates them.

Judas has another love: he loves money. John reveals that at some point later on, when Judas was replaced as the treasurer, they found out that he had actually been helping himself to a good percentage. So not only does he not see the point of what she is doing, but his covetous heart is angry over a missed money-making opportunity.

Now this kind of cold heart of disdain is found in many places in Scripture. It's found when Cain is disgusted that his brother Abel's sacrifice has been accepted and his has not. It's found when David celebrates the Ark coming up to Jerusalem in exuberant singing and dancing in a parade, and his wife Michal sees him from her window and despises his unbridled enthusiasm. It's found when the Pharisees disdained the tax collectors and prostitutes who repented in tears at Jesus feet, and celebrated with Him in feasts. Or when the disciples shouted "Hosanna to the King" when He rode in to Jerusalem, and the Pharisees told Jesus to rebuke His disciples. In fact, Jesus told three

parables to teach the Pharisees that their disdain was out of place: a woman finding a lost coin, a shepherd finding lost sheep, and a prodigal son returning to his father. In that last parable, they were like the older brother, resentful and scornful of the celebration of his return.

What do all these things have in common? A cold heart, lacking in love, expressing a mixture of envy and disgust in another's simple, childlike joy in God. Despising the enthusiasm and excitement of a new believer making new discoveries in the Word. Despising the heartfelt prayers and songs of young Christians. Despising the ambitions and plans and evangelism of another. Despising the awakened and revived state of another Christians. The only reason to despise this is when you are convicted by the coldness of your own heart, and want to explain away someone else's joy as fake, or superficial, or empty. It's when you wish you had that, so in jealousy, like Cain, you try to tear down what they are doing.

Now make no mistake: sometimes the zeal and enthusiasm of an immature believer is a bit malformed, a bit over-the-top, a bit outside the lines. But what they need is to be guided to express and feel rightly, not, as was done to Mary, harshly criticised.

And Judas's supposedly practical alternative is also found in various forms today. Why this waste on a baby-grand piano and hymnals and a beautiful building? How can you have red carpets and pew cushions when that could have become bread for a soup kitchen? Why this waste on seminary education and hours on sermons, when that could have become thousands of gospel tracts?

You can always claim that some ministry need is more urgent and pressing than some other and thereby pour disdain on someone else's adoration. C. S. Lewis faced that question during World War 2, when bombs being dropped on Britain made people ask why bother with higher learning, or beauty, or theology, or anything except wartime realities? His answer was simple: the Christian life is not just the most urgent thing: evangelizing, missions, or feeding the poor. The Christian life is the whole human life: work, economics, vocation, recreation, politics, family, education. You can adore God in all these ways, not just in one of them. And he pointed this out, when you stop doing one thing in the supposed name of urgent practical needs, all you end up doing is the same thing in inferior ways. If we decided that it was a waste to adore God with a baby grand and hardcover hymnals and use the money differently, it's not as if we're going to stop singing. All that will happen is that we'll sing inferior songs on inferior instruments.

Sometimes the "why this waste?" objection doesn't come from a deep love of good stewardship. It can come from a cold disdain for extravagant devotion. The husband who says that buying his wife an anniversary gift is a waste of money, when the children need food and clothing, or when the house needs urgent repair is not really convincing his wife. She knows it's not either show affection to my wife or meet family needs. She knows that love and meeting needs go together.

Judas was convincing Jesus either. Judas just couldn't mask how disgusted he was. So what Jesus does next is judge between Mary's action and Judas's response.

### **III. Jesus' Exonerating Declaration**

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

Leave her alone, Jesus says. In the other Gospels, Jesus says, "Why do you trouble the woman? For she has done a good work for me." How is her choice of pouring this expensive perfume over Him a good work?

First, it was practically useful. Within six days, Jesus would be dead on a cross. This powerful perfume would still linger when it was time to embalm his body with fragrant spices. As opposed to Judas' comment that it was a waste, Jesus pointed out one very practical benefit that none of them had thought of. This would be part of his burial.

Second, it was prioritised correctly. Jesus would not always be on the earth, and the opportunities to serve Him, to show kindness and adoration to Him were limited by this brief window of time. On the other hand, poverty was not going to be solved in any of their lifetimes. This is not a callous statement. It simply means, you will never lack opportunity to do good to the poor, but there were only six days left to do good to Jesus. As opposed to Judas' comment that she had misused the finances, Jesus responds by saying, actually she has rightly read this moment and redeemed the time. She has seized the moment and done what is best for this moment.

Third, it would have permanent memorial. In Matthew, we read that Jesus said, "Assuredly, I say to you, wherever this gospel is preached in the whole world, what this woman has done will also be told as a memorial to her." (Matthew 26:10–13)

Judas spoke as if her act was a one-time wasted sprinkling of perfume, to have no lingering effects beyond this moment. Jesus refutes that. In fact, her act of extravagant devotion would now be written in God's Word, and people would read about it and hear about it all over the world for ages to come. And that prophecy has come true, for we are doing that right now. Extravagant devotion to Him is not forgotten.

Jesus exonerates her extravagant devotion and says, it was practical, it was wise priorities, and it is a permanent good work.

Now after Jesus has said that hers was the right approach, and Judas' was the wrong, it is actually the last straw for Judas. Mark tells us that <sup>10</sup> Then Judas Iscariot, one of the twelve, went to the chief priests to betray Him to them. (Mark 14:10)

This is so often the reaction, when the hard heart is exposed for what it is. When Cain was shown his heart, his anger turned into murder. When David rebuked Michal, she hardened her heart even more and ended up living childlessly apart from David. When Jesus rebuked the Pharisees for their hard hearts, they became even more infuriated.

Now today we can find ourselves tending in one of two directions. If you're tending in the Judas direction, then you're finding people who love Christ more and more irritating. You are adopting more and more cynicism towards worship. In fact, you've found yourself using terms like "it's a waste of time", "it's a waste of petrol money". You're becoming more sceptical of acts of devotion towards God. And the tipping point is when someone points out to you that it is your offering that is faulty, your heart that is wrong, your judgement that is off. If that's you, you need to do a 180 turn and come to God, humbled and convicted of becoming a scoffer.

If you're tending in the Mary direction, then you know that nothing is more delightful than expressing the worth of God in costly ways. But the cost might be putting you off: the cost in time, the cost in effort, the cost in discipline, the cost to your marriage, to your family, to your reputation. You're wondering if it will be worth it. Jesus's response is this: it will be worth it because there is no higher priority than worship. It will be worth it because adoration for God never fades or is forgotten, it is permanent. It will be worth it because nothing ends up having more practical effects than extravagant love for God.

The same British Missionary, C. T. Studd, wrote a hymn

Two little lines I heard one day, Traveling along life's busy way;  
Bringing conviction to my heart, And from my mind would not depart;  
Only one life, 'twill soon be past, Only what's done for Christ will last.

Mary understood that. Do you?