

## John - Part 38 - Sermon Manuscript - Honoring Jesus

Today we're going to talk about a woman named Mary - Not Mary the mother of Jesus... and not Mary Magdalene, the prostitute turned follower of Jesus. We're talking about Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus.

Mary lived with Martha and Lazarus in Bethany, which was just across the valley from Jerusalem. And at this point in John 12, we're getting closer to a major Jewish holiday called the Passover.

**John 12:1 says, "Six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, where Lazarus lived, who Jesus had raised from the dead."**

At this point, Jerusalem would have been getting pretty crowded. Jews from all over the known world were flocking to Jerusalem for the Passover. As a Jew, you always wanted to be sure to arrive early... arriving late to the Passover festival wasn't an option.

Some of the more wealthy Jews would bring their own tents and to camp outside, while others might have had family or friends they could stay with in the area. But before they did anything, most of the Jews would go directly to the Temple Courts for their ceremonial cleansing before the festival started.

And as we read last time toward the end of chapter 11, many of the Jews were already there in the temple courts looking for Jesus. They were wondering if He'd even come at all since the religious leaders had a warrant for His arrest.

So, instead of staying in Jerusalem for the festival, Jesus ended up staying with His friends, Mary, Martha and Lazarus, in Bethany. From there they could all easily walk over to Jerusalem in the morning and then back into Bethany for the night.

So again, Jesus arrived in Bethany 6 days before the Passover. The gospel of Mark tells us that *two days* before the Passover, there was a dinner at Mary and Martha's house given in honor of Jesus. Here's what happened...

**John 12:2-11** - Here a dinner was given in Jesus' honor. Martha served, while Lazarus was among those reclining at the table with him. 3 Then Mary took about a pint of pure nard, an expensive perfume; she poured it on Jesus' feet and wiped his feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.

4 But one of his disciples, Judas Iscariot, who was later to betray him, objected, 5 "Why wasn't this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year's wages." 6 He did not say this because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief; as keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it.

7 "Leave her alone," Jesus replied. "It was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial. 8 You will always have the poor among you, p but you will not always have me."

9 Meanwhile a large crowd of Jews found out that Jesus was there and came, not only because of him but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. 10 So the chief priests made plans to kill Lazarus as well, 11 for on account of him many of the Jews were going over to Jesus and believing in him.

**[Blank]** Okay, I already mentioned that I'd like to focus on Mary this morning. She does something interesting here...

She takes about a pint of perfume - which was about 12 ounces - and pours it on Jesus. But this wasn't just any perfume. It was rare! This kind of perfume that's made out of spikenard, which was a "very expensive fragrant oil from a plant in the mountains [of] northern India."<sup>1</sup>

Judas mentions that this bottle of perfume was worth a year's wage! The Greek literally says it was worth three hundred denarius, which the NIV translators help us out by saying it's worth a year's wage.

In case you're wondering how much that would cost today... we're talking about a bottle of perfume that would cost well over \$40,000!!!

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<sup>1</sup> Keener, Craig S. John. Ed. Clinton E. Arnold. Vol. 2A. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2019. Print. Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary.

Can you imagine taking a \$40,000 bottle of perfume and pouring it all out on someone?! All of the sudden Judas seems justified for his reaction.

Here's the thing with Judas... we know he would go on to betray Jesus. We even know from our passage today that Judas was not only in charge of the money the disciples took in, but we know he was taking some off the top for himself!

But no one would have known that at this point, except for Jesus - b/c He's God and He always knows what's going on.

Everyone except for Jesus would have had a great respect for Judas at this point. Mark's account adds a detail that implies it wasn't just Judas that was upset with Mary. Mark says, "they rebuked her *harshly*" for what she did.

### **I wonder how Mary felt at that moment?**

Here she is, at the feet of Jesus, being completely submissive to Him in an act of honor, and these guys give her a stern warning as if she had committed a crime!

Picture Jesus reclining at the table with Lazarus and the disciples. If I remember correctly, Jews didn't always recline at the dinner table. They only reclined during special occasions.

So, Jesus is reclining and Mary is next to Him with her alabaster jar of expensive perfume. She breaks the seal off the jar, and then begins to **pour it all over Jesus.**

**Side Note:** John focuses on Jesus' feet, but Mark's gospel tells us that she poured the perfume over Jesus' body - from His head to His feet.

When she was done pouring out her \$40,000 dollar jar of perfume, she then let her hair down. The text doesn't say this, but we know from historical records that Jewish women wore their hair up in public. They never let it down in public. In fact, the only person to see it worn down would have been their husband.

So, we can assume that Mary was wearing her hair up since that was what was normal in her culture. But in order to wipe the excess perfume off of Jesus, she decided to let her hair down.

I can imagine everyone around her watching this scene play out... They were already getting upset because she used the expensive perfume. But now they're probably just *shocked* at her scandalous behavior!

One scholar I read said that Mary was acting with “extravagant abandon, hoping that the close circle of friends [would] understand [her actions].”<sup>2</sup>

In other words, **Mary simply let go of the normal social rules and behavioral expectations that she grew up with so that she could perform a humble act of worship.**

**Side Note:** I have to admit - I wondered why she just didn't grab a towel? Maybe they didn't have enough because of all the people there? Who knows?

In Matthew and Mark, Jesus describes her actions as beautiful. In fact, He goes on to say that “wherever this gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her.” (Mark 14:9; Matthew 26:13)

Notice the contrast - Judas and the other disciples thought that what she was doing was wrong and socially unacceptable, and yet Jesus calls it beautiful.

So, when the disciples get on Mary's case, Jesus immediately says, “Leave her alone! Why are you bothering this woman?”

He explains in John that she was saving this bottle of perfume for the day of His burial. But we read in Matthew and Mark that she decided to prepare His body early, for burial.

**That tells us something significant.**

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<sup>2</sup> Burge, Gary M. John. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 2000. Print. The NIV Application Commentary.

Think about it... usually bodies would be anointed with oil after they're dead. That's just part of normal Jewish burial preparations. But Mary does it early...

**Why?** In Mark, Jesus says...

**Mark 14:7-8 - "The poor you will always have with you, and you can help them any time you want. But you will not always have me. *She did what she could. She poured perfume on my body beforehand to prepare for my burial.*"**

*She did what she could.* I take this to mean that this was her way of honoring Jesus because she believed Him when He would talk about His coming death.

She knew the threat of His arrest and death were very real, and *very* likely, because He wasn't going to avoid the religious leaders in Jerusalem. And so, out of her love and devotion to Jesus, she decided to anoint Him *early*, because she knew His time had come... [explain?]

And remember, she anointed Jesus with perfume just two days before the Passover. This is merely *days* before Jesus was crucified!

**Think about this...**

The perfume she poured on Jesus was so strong that the fragrance filled the house. Scholars have pointed out that this wasn't the type of scent that washed off easily. In fact, it's very possible this scent stayed with him during the last week of His life!

Think about that... When the Roman soldiers were beating Him and mocking Him... when He was carrying His cross as far as He could before Simon helped Him out... and when He was hanging on the cross... the sweet aroma of Mary's gift would have been a warm reminder of her faith.

Personally, I think this is part of the reason why Jesus calls her act... ***beautiful.*** But there's more to it than just the aroma...

What Mary did was what was done to Kings in the Old Testament. Her act of anointing Jesus with oil was most definitely her acknowledging that Jesus was the true Messiah, the King and Savior of the world.

Mary was a true disciple of Jesus. She wasn't one of the original 12, but she was definitely one of His disciples. Jesus actually had many disciples (we read about that in John 6).

In fact, there's a story in Luke where we're first introduced to Mary and Martha...

Jesus and His disciples were traveling from town to town as they were on their way to Jerusalem. They went to Jerusalem at least a few times during the ministry of Jesus, and honestly I'm not sure which time this was, but either way, when He came to Bethany, Martha (Mary's sister) opened her home to Him.

We know from other passages that Mary, Martha and Lazarus probably all lived together in one home. We don't know if they had spouses, but if they did, it wasn't uncommon for families to live together like that.

It also wasn't uncommon to invite a traveling Rabbi into your home. But instead of charging them rent, the Rabbi would teach in your home as their payment for your hospitality.

So, in Luke 10, we have this familiar scene where Martha was working in the kitchen, but Mary was in the other room sitting at the feet of Jesus while He taught. Normally the women wouldn't have been allowed in the room while the Rabbi taught... they were expected to be in the kitchen working on the meal... which is why Martha got upset!

But Jesus said...

**Luke 10:41-42 - "Martha, Martha," the Lord answered, "you are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed—or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her."**

What has Mary chosen? She chose to be a disciple of Jesus! Luke tells us that Mary "sat at the Lord's feet listening to what He said."

We know that the place of a disciple was “sitting at the feet of the teacher,” but it was highly “unusual for a first century [Jewish] woman to [even be] accepted by [the Rabbi] as a disciple.”<sup>3</sup>

But we also know that Jesus didn’t always do what everyone expected. After all, some of His original disciples were fishermen, which was also highly unlikely.

### **So what’s my point?**

My point is that it seems like from the moment Mary met Jesus, she was a true follower of His. And her action in John 12 of anointing Jesus as her Messiah and King, as a preparation for His coming death, was not only honoring Jesus, but it was also beautiful because **her actions were the fruit of her faith in Jesus.**

I find it interesting that in another account, there’s a widowed woman who gives two coins to the Temple treasury, and Jesus was impressed with her faith because she gave all that she had. It wasn’t about how much she gave - it was about her heart.

In the same way, Mary gave a gift to Jesus that was incredibly expensive! But that’s not what impressed Him. He was moved because of her heart.

**For these women, *both* acts were selfless expressions of their faith.**

Honestly, that really challenged my thinking as I prepared this week.

I was thinking that if I had been in the room with Jesus and the other disciples when Judas spoke up, I probably would have agreed with Judas. Obviously I wouldn’t have known Judas was embezzling money, but I know I would have thought using that expensive jar of perfume was a waste.

There’s so much more we could have done with it! We could have provided for the needs of the poor. We could have given some of it to the Temple to provide for the priests and the work they did there. I mean, there’s any number of things

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<sup>3</sup> Liefeld, Walter L., and David W. Pao. “Luke.” *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Luke–Acts (Revised Edition)*. Ed. Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland. Vol. 10. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007. 201. Print.

we could have done for those less fortunate than us! So why waste it like Mary just did?

But Jesus is saying that Mary didn't waste it. Her gift was beautiful to Him. Here's what one bible scholar had to say about this...

**In his commentary on John's Gospel, Dr. Gary Burge said:** "I would like to argue that Mary's gift may be something we may worthily imitate today—with caution and with discernment, of course, but nevertheless it is there. At the simplest level this tension surfaces when a church board debates refurbishing a tattered, dark sanctuary and one person piously remarks, "Jesus would have us feed the poor, not install new carpet and lights." There it is. Mary's nard has been sold, and another congregation has been forbidden to honor Jesus in a way that may be fitting."<sup>4</sup>

Dr. Burge is saying that it's possible to honor Jesus in ways that might seem extravagant to others. But what truly matters is not how expensive our act of honoring Jesus is... what matters is our heart behind it.

It's all about the "why" behind the things we do.

So, I know that's kind of a lot to process this morning, so I'll just end by asking all of us to think about these questions, in light of our passage today:

**How can we honor Jesus personally? How can we honor Jesus as a Church family?**

Whatever we do, our acts of honor for Jesus should be the fruit of our faith, and not out of a sense of mere obligation. Jesus challenges our hearts in such a way that encourages us to reflect on *why* we do the things we do.

**Let's Pray**

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<sup>4</sup> Burge, Gary M. John. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 2000. Print. The NIV Application Commentary.