

“Faith’s Devotion”

John 12:1-11

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Text Comment

- v.2 That is, if Passover was celebrated Thursday evening of the next week, then six days before, on Friday, just before the onset of the Sabbath day, Jesus would have arrived in Bethany and the banquet described in the following verses would probably have occurred the following evening – Saturday night – after the Sabbath was over.

The text does not say who hosted this dinner. In Mark 14:3 we learn that this banquet was held at the home of Simon the Leper (almost certainly a man that Jesus had healed). It has been wondered through the ages if this Simon might not have been the father of Lazarus, Mary, and Martha and so it was their own home where the banquet was held. That Martha was helping to serve would support that suggestion, but she could have been simply a close friend of Simon or some other kind of relative.

- v.3 We will be told shortly how expensive this perfume was. That the entire house smelled of the perfume is an indication of how much of it was used and how fine a perfume it was.

As the guests reclined at the table, their feet would have extended away from the table and it would have been possible to anoint as much of the person as one wished. As we will see, John concentrates on the feet, even though we learn in the other gospels that other parts of the Lord’s body were anointed as well.

- v.5 Judas is the one who speaks but Mark indicates that he wasn’t the only one with the same thought. (14:4) John, of course, mentions Judas in his later role as the traitor, but no one knew it at the time. Only afterward did his behavior seem clearly to indicate what had been really in his heart on this occasion.

The price is given literally as 300 denarii. The denarius was the daily wage given to a common day-laborer, so 300 denarii would have been a year’s wages because nothing would have been paid the man for the Sabbaths or other holy days. A soldier in the regular Roman army received 225 denarii per year in wages. This seems further to indicate, as have other details in the narrative, that this family was well-to-do.

- v.6 Perhaps Judas had hoped that the perfume would have been sold and turned into cash and given to the Master. Then, as keeper of the money bag, he could have helped himself to some of it. But, believe me, Judas wasn’t the first and he wouldn’t be the last to hide his greed behind a thin veil of altruism and concern for the poor. Mark makes it clear (14:10-11) that it was this episode, ending in the Lord’s sharp rebuke, that finally convinced Judas to approach the religious authorities with his offer to help them seize Jesus.

- v.7 The idea is not that Mary understood what was so soon to happen and that, within a week, the Lord would be dead and buried. Like Caiaphas in the previous chapter (11:49-52) she indicated more than she knew. [Carson, 430] The Greek here is very difficult and the commentators go round and round about the best understanding of it. But Mark's account of the Lord's meaning is simple and straightforward: "She anticipated my burial."
- v.8 The Lord's statement about himself and the poor is both a veiled prediction of his coming passion and a justification of Mary's unmeasured devotion to him. Coming from anyone else it would raise questions in the mind! But coming from one whose entire life was a commitment to the poor and who was no one less than the Son of God, it makes perfect sense.
- v.9 Remember that immediately after raising Lazarus from the dead Jesus had departed for the village of Ephraim, about 12 miles away, to stay out of the way of the religious leadership who had, in effect, put out a contract on his life. So folk who had not had a chance to see Jesus after the great miracle naturally were curious.
- v.10 It was necessary to kill Lazarus not only because he was himself a powerful argument for faith in Jesus, but also because he was a living disproof of the Sadducees' denial of the resurrection! They denied that there was such a thing as life after death and here was a living man who had died! The chief priests, those mentioned specifically here, were Sadducees. In their desperation they do not seem to worry that the Lord would simply raise Lazarus again! There is no evidence, by the way, that this plot against Lazarus was ever carried out.

We have said on a number of occasions so far in our studies in the Gospel that John is interested in presenting Jesus Christ to us as the Son of God and the Savior in order that we might believe in him *and, at the same time, showing us what it means to believe in him*. We have been given a comprehensive portrait of the Lord Jesus, so far in the Gospel, that we might understand who and what he is and how he is our Savior. Indeed, some further light strokes are added to that portrait in our text this morning. But, along the way, we have also been given pictures of men and women believing in the Lord Jesus and people refusing to believe in Jesus, people who show us in flesh and blood what true faith in Christ looks like, how it acts, how it changes a person and, on the other hand, people who show us how and why people fail to obtain eternal life through a living faith in Christ. If John wants us to believe in Jesus Christ that we might have eternal life, he must show us both Jesus Christ and living faith. And that is what he does in his gospel.

Clearly we have such a portrait of living faith before us in Mary's act of devotion. Indeed, special attention is drawn to that fact in the Gospel of Mark where the Lord's further words are recorded, "I tell you the truth, wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told in memory of her." Nothing like that is said by the Lord about anyone else in the Gospels or about the action of anyone else. What Mary did is something of capital importance. Or, in other words, take careful note of what Mary did. Follow her example if you want to know how to be saved, how to express true faith in Christ. The Lord makes the same

point here in v. 8 where he draws a lesson from Mary's devotion *for all* his disciples. He makes the "you" a plural. "You will always have the poor...but *you* will not always have me." In other words, he is saying, "what *she* did is a lesson for all of *you*." Indeed, remember how often we have seen in the Gospel to this point that John records the confused or mistaken statements of the disciples or other onlookers, precisely so that he could emphasize a lesson in the clarifying or correcting words of the Lord that then follow. We have such a lesson here. And the lesson is that Mary's act is a picture of true and living faith. Far from being a mistake, as Judas said, it was precisely what should have been done!

So often the lessons of the Bible come in the form of an anecdote like this. It is just a snapshot of faith in action, but a memorable one. And God has given us the power of imagination to extrapolate that single incident into an understanding of how we ought to live our lives. In other words, we can learn to see our lives as one constant anointing of the Lord's feet with very expensive perfume.

Think of John Bunyan and his sanctified imagination. He took a single scene from the biblical history – that of Abraham making his way as a pilgrim to the Promised Land – and a single remark, that in Hebrews 11 about Abraham being a stranger in this world, a pilgrim who was journeying to a better country, and turned it, by the power of his magnificent imagination, into an entire account of the Christian life. And those who have read *Pilgrim's Progress* have never stopped thinking about their lives as a pilgrimage from the City of Destruction to the Celestial City and see every day in their own experience the immortal characters and locations of Bunyan's masterpiece: the Slough of Despond, the Hill Difficulty, the Valley of Humiliation, Vanity Fair, the Delectable Mountains, and, at last the river, and Mr. Worldly Wiseman, Evangelist, Faithful, Talkative, and all the rest.

Well, such is our task this morning and throughout our Christian lives: to see Mary anointing the Lord with this expensive perfume and, in turn, making an entire life, every day, of doing the same ourselves. We are being summoned to imagine ourselves doing what she did, responding to Jesus as she did, for the reasons she did – for the life he had given to her and so magnificently to her brother. But, we must respond in our own way. We may have the poor with us, but we do not have the Lord Jesus Christ with us, at least not as Mary had him with her. So, what is it in Mary's act that makes it so commendable, what made it something the Lord said would always be remembered, what made it in the Lord's mind a lesson for all his disciples? Well, I think, it is Mary's devotion that the Lord is drawing to our attention, devotion as a measure of true faith in him, devotion as the mark, the evidence of true faith.

Think of the way in which that point is made here in the account of Mary's anointing the Lord.

I. First, see the self-sacrifice in her act, the self-forgetfulness which is a true measure of real devotion. And not self-forgetfulness only, but self-forgetfulness in immoderation, without measure.

There is no doubt that the impressiveness of what Mary did is the result of the fact that most others would not have done it! Not even those who would have called themselves and been known by others as his disciples. That perfume was extremely expensive. It was not your

ordinary perfume. Nard is an aromatic herb that grows in the high Himalayan pasture land of India and Tibet. It was very costly because it was gathered in such remote regions and had to be shipped such great distances on camel back. And John makes a point of telling us that this nard was the genuine article, pure nard, not a less expensive mixture.

The price is actually told us: 300 denarii, an amount that would have staggered the ordinary wage earner in Judea of those days. Suppose we likened it to the \$30,000 - \$40,000 medium annual income for folk in our society today? When we think of it in that way we can imagine ourselves wondering what Judas wondered!

Now Mary was not from a poor family – we noted that Lazarus was buried in a tomb and not a grave that indicated itself that the family was not poor by any means – but this perfume remains, even for Mary, a costly gift. The reaction of the disciples and Judas, recorded by the gospel writers, is designed precisely to emphasize that point.

But we are hardly done in noticing the extravagance of her devotion. Not only was the perfume expensive, but she poured out the entire bottle in anointing the Lord. So much perfume that *the house*, not merely the room, was full of the fragrance of it. And, as if that were not enough, she let down her hair – something a Jewish woman rarely or never would have done in public – and used her own hair to wipe the perfume off his feet.

This is David leaping and dancing before the ark. Michal his wife thought his behavior indecent, but David had to express his devotion! And, as he said later on another occasion, he would not offer sacrifices to the Lord that cost him nothing. Oh no! The more expensive the better!

Remember, just a few days before, the Lord had restored Lazarus to her, after the heartbreak of his death four days earlier. There he was, her beloved brother, reclining at the same table talking with such animation about the Master's power over death, answering the questions that the fellow guests couldn't help but ask him about his experience.

There was such a love in her heart for the Lord Jesus, such a love mixed with such a joy and gratitude and thrill, that absolutely had to find expression, and yet could not be expressed in words – not adequately. She had to *do* something to relieve her pent-up emotions. She had to get that most expensive thing she had in the house, break it upon, pour it upon the Lord's person, or her heart would break. [From Bruce, *The Training of the Twelve*, ad loc.]

But now, by imagination, we are to transfer that image of Mary in that fragrant house, wiping up that expensive perfume with her hair, to our own lives and ask: what would be the equivalent for me? How might I do so much for him, how might I make of my life so immoderate, so unqualified a sacrifice for him?

Oh, you know, and I know the answers to that question! We know all too well how often we clip and shave our devotion to the Lord, we give to him and to the poor in his name a little something out of our abundance, but hardly something that is going to make anyone else think we have given too much, that we have been too immoderate, too extravagant in our devotion to the Lord Jesus, that we have transgressed the boundaries of good sense in the measure of our affection and

enthusiasm for Him! Whether it is in our own private worship, our public worship, our witness to others on his behalf, our kindness and generosity to others in his name, whatever it is, we know, don't we, brothers and sisters, what our lives could be, should be, if patterned after Mary's splendid example of devotion for the Lord Jesus. And, what is more, we know full well, true faith knows full well, which is why devotion is a true mark of faith, faith knows that looking at Lazarus reclining at that banquet table, and seeing ourselves in our mind's eye at the great banquet table some day, that nothing short of a devotion that would be irrational, even repugnant to an unbeliever is enough of a response for grace as great as what has been lavished on us by Jesus Christ our Redeemer!

Listen to these golden words from Archbishop William Temple and his famously suggestive work on the Gospel of John [*Readings*, 190].

“To the worldly mind the acts of devotion are always foolish. God does not require our costly gifts for His honour; better spend on good works what is lavished on worship; so men often say. And there is a lurking truth. For what men spend on acts of worship is spent on what they share, and the gift may therefore be infected with self-interest. We ought (for example) to offer to God in worship the best music that we can. But our subscription to the organ fund at our Church is likely to be more self-regarding than our support of a mission in a place we shall never see; for we ourselves shall enjoy the music. Yet it is true also that where lavish expenditure expresses the overflowing of a heart's devotion, it is unspeakably precious. For love is the best thing that there is, and what represents its best moments shares that preciousness.” *The poor at all times ye have with you, but me ye have not at all times.* The Lord would soon be taken away from Mary; and it is only at moments of vivid insight that any of us perceive his Presence. At those times, there is a fervour in our love for the present Lord that will not often be found in our kindly attitude towards the poor. That may be genuine enough; and what we do for them is done to Him [Matt. xxv, 40]; but it lacks the completeness of the love which is adoration. As the best thing is love itself, not the benefits which it confers, there must be no censure of its lavishness as disproportionate.”

But there is more here in the way in which true faith is presented as expressing itself in devotion. That devotion which is the reflex of true faith is not only marked by an immoderate self-sacrifice.

II. In the second place, that devotion expresses itself in the humility of that self-denial.

We have already been struck with that thinking of Mary letting her hair down in front of all of those men and wiping up the perfume with her hair. But there is something that would have been a greater demonstration of that humility before the Lord, that self-forgetfulness before her Savior, to those who were there that night in the house of Simon the leper. And it was that Mary wiped the Lord's *feet* with her hair.

It is interesting and highly important that John makes a special mention of this, that Mary anointed the Lord's *feet* and then wiped *his feet* with her hair. Matthew and Mark, in their account of this incident, do not mention the Lord's feet. They say, rather, that the perfume was

poured on his head. Now, no doubt, it was poured on both his head and his feet, indeed, -- the entire jar having been emptied – it would have been far too much to pour over just the head or just the feet. And in Matthew and Mark the Lord is reported as having said that Mary anointed *his body* for burial, not just his head. But John is making a point of the feet.

In wealthier families like this family, the servants attended to the dusty feet of their guests. This was menial work. Remember how just a few days later – as we will read in the very next chapter of John, the Lord Jesus took a basin and a towel and washed his disciples feet and how difficult it was for them to catch on to what he was doing and to accept what he was teaching them. It was not easy for them to think of themselves washing any and everyone's feet.

Without even opening her mouth, Mary had said in the most powerful and beautiful and memorable way, "He must increase, I must decrease. He is everything, I am nothing. I wish to be nothing but his servant." All regard for her own name and reputation was gladly given up. She could see Lazarus and her own everlasting life and she could see the Lord Jesus to whom she owed everything, but her sight of herself was growing dimmer, less interesting all the while. No false humility here, no pretense, no self-hatred or low self-esteem, no inferiority complex. But the glad surrender of herself and her name to another far more worthy of her love and devotion.

There is a picture of true faith! There is a picture of one who really understands. That is what one does who thinks rightly about life, death, and Jesus Christ the Son of God!

You remember, don't you, the calling of Francis of Assisi? He had dreamed as a boy and then as a young man of doing great exploits in battle. Had always wanted to be a warrior, a knight, covered with glory. Then one day he was riding outside his town – perhaps while riding he was indulging in those very dreams of glory on the field of battle. But he saw coming toward him on the road, not the banners and spears of the army of Perugia, Assisi's ancient enemy, but instead a single figure, whom, when he got closer, he realized was a leper. And he knew, in an instant, that his courage was being tested, not as the world challenges courage, but as God does who knows the secrets of men's hearts. We can imagine what transpired in those few moments in the heart of that man so soon to be one of the greatest men of the Christian church. And then he sprang off his horse and rushed to the leper and threw his arms around him and then gave to him everything he had to give. He then remounted and rode off. We don't know how far he rode, but it is said that when he looked back, there was no man standing in the road. [From Chesterton, *St. Francis*, 52]

When people come to me to receive help in bearing up under their trials, I say to them, among other things, that they have been given a great opportunity, a special gift – even if it seems to them at the time the furthest thing from a gift. They have been given an opportunity to give glory to God, to express their devotion to him in the way that matters most, by doing something very difficult, requiring a great sacrifice of them: viz. to bear patiently and humbly and with faith and love a very heavy cross. To say with the humility of true faith, "Yet, though he slay me, I will trust in him." Soon, very soon, you will have cause to thank God that he gave you something very difficult to do for his Name's sake, if, indeed, you did that difficult thing in faith, hope, and love. Is it the struggles of a marriage, of poor health, or living and working among people who are contemptuous of your Christian faith, is it poverty, or loneliness, or fear, or

depression, or is it, as it must be for all of us, the conflict with sin? Whatever it is, you have been given an opportunity just like Mary's to show your devotion to the Lord in a manner that proves it beyond any doubt! And, I tell you, in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, you will soon be more glad for that opportunity afforded you by your trial than for all the pleasure and all the peace and all the comfort and all the success you ever enjoyed in this world.

I envy Mary and I envy her welcome in the kingdom of God!