



Jonesboro Heights Baptist Church
Sanford, North Carolina

Dr. Mark E. Gaskins
Senior Pastor

The Lord's Day
March 29, 2009

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At Supper with Jesus: A Portrait of the Christian Life
John 12:1-8

It's a beautiful, simple story. Jesus and His disciples had come to Bethany, just a few miles from Jerusalem, where Lazarus lived. Jesus would soon enter Jerusalem to begin the final week of His earthly life. But for now, He wanted to be with His dear friends, Lazarus, Mary, and Martha.

Notice that John reminds us that this Lazarus is the same Lazarus Jesus had raised from the dead. This family not only knew and loved Jesus; through this incredible experience of Jesus' bringing Lazarus back to life after he had been dead and buried for four days, they *knew Him* as few others did, and they *loved Him* in a way that was beyond the love of most of His followers.

So it's not surprising that they would participate in a supper given in Jesus' honor. Matthew and Mark tell us that this supper was hosted in the home of Simon the leper. John tells us here that during the supper Martha was serving and Lazarus was one of those reclining at the table with Jesus. Mary had slipped away for a moment, and had come back with a costly treasure—about of pint of a very costly perfumed ointment made of pure nard from India.

To give you a sense of just how expensive it was, it was worth roughly 300 denarii. Now a denarius was a day's wage for most people of that day. In other words, this ointment was worth about a year's wages of a regular laborer. It was the kind of thing you saved up to buy and held onto for when your loved ones died, to anoint their bodies for burial to cut down as much as possible on the stench from the tomb as their bodies began to decay.

Mary brought this incredibly expensive perfume, and while Jesus was being served by Martha and was sharing in fellowship at the table with Lazarus and the others, she knelt down, opened the container, and anointed Jesus' feet with the ointment. Then in humble adoration, she let down the hair of her head, and began using it as a towel to wipe the excess off His feet. It was an awesome act of adoration.

A surprising reaction

You would think, wouldn't you, that those there that day would have thought it was, too. But no! We don't really know how the others reacted, except that John tells us how one disciple reacted—Judas Iscariot.

“Why wasn't this perfume sold for a year's wages and the proceeds given to the poor?”¹ It sounded good on the surface—“Let's not frivolously waste it! We can really do some good with the proceeds from it!”

¹ Scripture translations in this sermon are my own.

John tells us, though, that it was not concern for the poor that made Judas say this. He was the keeper of the moneybag (the common purse), and frequently pilfered what was put into it. John also reminds us that it was Judas who was about to betray Jesus.

So there was Judas, criticizing this awesome act of adoration. The supper was fine, and sitting around talking with Jesus was fine. But this anointing of Jesus, especially His feet, with this costly perfume, well that was just more than Judas could take!

It's a simple story. Yet so true to John's way of presenting the gospel of Jesus Christ, this simple story is so incredibly profound.

Jesus responded to Judas' criticism by simply saying, "Leave her alone, so that she may keep it for the day of My burial. You always have the poor among you to do something for them, but you do not always have Me."

Reframing the issue

In one swift saying, Jesus had completely reframed the issue. While the supper was given in His honor, His one disloyal disciple had tried to attack an awesome act of adoration as a waste, as a squandering of resources that should be used for practical, "real ministry."

But in reality, wasn't there was something much deeper going on here, something that amounted to a sinister conflict?

On one side was a grateful soul who wanted to lavish her love on the One who had already raised her brother from death and was about to give His own life in a death that would bring salvation from sin to anyone who would trust Him.

On the other was a disciple who didn't understand what Jesus had come to do and was evidently disgruntled because it was becoming apparent that his expectations were not going to be fulfilled in Jesus. One wanted to give Jesus her most precious treasure; the other not only didn't want to give his most precious treasure, he wanted to prevent her from giving hers as well!

Painting a portrait

Have you ever taken a good look at a painted portrait of a person? This kind of portrait is different from a photographic portrait of a person, because it involves the artist's interpretation of the individual. Whereas a photograph simply shows what's there, wrinkles and all, a painted portrait emphasizes certain features in order to portray something of the subject's character. Sometimes the painted portrait actually looks very little like a photograph of the subject, but it tells the person's story in a powerful way.

A number of years ago, my family and I were visiting some friends one weekend when I was preaching at my friend's church. That Sunday after the service, we ate lunch at his mother's home. In her living room was a large portrait of her husband, who had been dead for 25 years or more. But looking at that painting, you could get a sense of the kind of person her husband was. That's what a good portrait does.

When I look at this story in our text, I sometimes wonder if John wasn't painting us a portrait here. Of course, there are several characters in the story, so you might say, "Which one was he trying to paint?" Maybe rather than just trying to portray one of them, he was painting them all to portray something bigger—what it means to be in a relationship with Jesus Christ. Maybe with this story about being at supper with Jesus, John was painting for us *a portrait of the Christian life*. Think about it for a minute.

Who is at the center of the picture? Isn't it Jesus? Isn't the supper given in His honor? Aren't those who are eating described as "reclining at the table with Him"? The focus is on Jesus, not those with Him. His presence in it gives definition to the entire work.

Look at Martha. There she is, scurrying about, back and forth, *servicing*. She's making sure everybody has what he or she needs to enjoy the meal. She wants it all to be just right for Jesus. She wants to *do* everything she can to make Him comfortable and His meal enjoyable.

Look at Lazarus. He is one of those at the table with Jesus. And why not? He knows what Jesus has done for him. He brought him literally from death to life! Now, in love and gratitude, Lazarus wants to spend every moment he can with Jesus. He simply wants to *be* with the One who has done so incredibly much for him.

But for Mary, doing for Jesus and being with Him are somehow not enough. Not only is He at the center of this picture, He's in the center of her heart. So in an act that could only be described as extravagant, Mary offered her most precious treasure to Jesus. But she didn't just offer her treasure; she offered herself as well, as she unbound her hair and used it as a towel to wipe the feet of her beloved Lord. Somehow or another, she knew this was connected with Jesus' coming death. She didn't understand all that this meant, but she did seem to understand that in His death, God would do something to accomplish His redemptive purpose. She had intended to keep the perfume to anoint His body for burial; but somehow, she felt compelled to go ahead and do it now.

And there's Judas. He could see some value in what Martha was doing. He could maybe even understand why Lazarus so desperately wanted to be with Jesus. But he simply couldn't fathom what he saw as a wasting of this costly perfume on Jesus, *especially on his feet!*

The Christian life

Doesn't this all ring so true to the Christian life? Isn't Jesus at the center of the picture of the *truly* Christian life? Isn't His great redemptive sacrifice what governs our relationship with Him? Isn't our service a grateful response to His grace and an integral component of this life? Aren't fellowship and communion with Jesus as a part of our larger fellowship with Him vital to our walk and our relationship with Him? Don't all these go into a way of life that honors Him, a life of worship that understands, at least to some degree, who He is and who we are in relation to Him, and is lived accordingly?

When Judas compared Mary's adoration of Jesus with Martha's service and Lazarus' fellowship with Him, it seemed the least important—even frivolous, wasteful. But Jesus *commended* Mary's extravagant act.

There are times when service simply is not enough, when even our sweet communion with Christ as a family of believers is not enough to express our love and worship of Jesus. Sometimes, only a *truly extravagant* act of love and adoration and devotion will express our worship and is worthy of our relationship with Jesus, especially when we think about the magnitude of His extravagant sacrifice for us!

Back in 1964, Arizona's Senator Barry Goldwater ran against Lyndon Johnson for the presidency of the United States. Goldwater's opponents painted him as a radical and extremist. He responded to them by accepting that characterization gladly, declaring, "Extremism in the defense of liberty is no vice!"²

² <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/barrygoldwater1964mc.htm>.

Well, Judas and his kind would paint Mary's extravagant act of worship as wasteful and senseless, maybe even wrong. But I would submit to you this morning that such extravagance in the expression of our adoration and love of Jesus is no vice and no waste! Sometimes, a great sacrifice on our part is the *only* appropriate expression of our gratitude for His greatest sacrifice on our behalf.

Do you see John's portrait? *The Christian life is a life that honors Jesus through service and fellowship and extravagant adoration.* We honor Him because of His great love and sacrifice for us.

So I have to ask myself . . . With all He has done for us, how can I not serve him? How can I not want to be with him, to share in communion with him? And how can I not pour out myself and all I have to this one who poured out his life *for me*?

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