

## **Extravagant Worship vs. Extraordinary Hatred**

John 11:55 – 12:11 | Pastor Jason Van Bommel

*<sup>55</sup> Now the Passover of the Jews was at hand, and many went up from the country to Jerusalem before the Passover to purify themselves.<sup>56</sup> They were looking for Jesus and saying to one another as they stood in the temple, “What do you think? That he will not come to the feast at all?” <sup>57</sup> Now the chief priests and the Pharisees had given orders that if anyone knew where he was, he should let them know, so that they might arrest him.*

***12** Six days before the Passover, Jesus therefore came to Bethany, where Lazarus was, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. <sup>2</sup> So they gave a dinner for him there. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those reclining with him at table. <sup>3</sup> Mary therefore took a pound of expensive ointment made from pure nard, and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped his feet with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. <sup>4</sup> But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (he who was about to betray him), said, <sup>5</sup> “Why was this ointment not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?” <sup>6</sup> He said this, not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief, and having charge of the moneybag he used to help himself to what was put into it. <sup>7</sup> Jesus said, “Leave her alone, so that she may keep it for the day of my burial. <sup>8</sup> For the poor you always have with you, but you do not always have me.”*

*<sup>9</sup> When the large crowd of the Jews learned that Jesus was there, they came, not only on account of him but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. <sup>10</sup> So the chief priests made plans to put Lazarus to death as well, <sup>11</sup> because on account of him many of the Jews were going away and believing in Jesus. — John 11:55 – 12:11, ESV*

During the summer between my 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> grade years, I worked as a gardener’s assistant at the Yorktown National Battlefield Park. Much of my summer was spent weeding the garden beds and trimming the hedges around the Thomas Nelson house. Thomas Nelson is not a famous name outside of the area in Southeastern Virginia where I went to high school, yet he stands in stark contrast to another Revolutionary War figure whose name you probably would recognize, Benedict Arnold.

Benedict Arnold was the hero of Saratoga before his name became synonymous with treason and treachery. He was a decorated, experienced general, whose love of himself and whose lavish lifestyle led him to betray the American cause to the British for money, offering to surrender West Point to the British and switch sides in the war for 10,000 Pounds.

Thomas Nelson was a Virginian who was fighting alongside George Washington when his hometown, Yorktown, became the home of British General Cornwallis and was put under siege by Washington. This was the decisive moment of the long war. Cornwallis was surrounded and the Americans began bombarding Yorktown, to force a surrender before any reinforcements could arrive. When Thomas

Nelson learned that Cornwallis was using his home as his headquarters in Yorktown, Nelson himself gave the order to fire on his home. A cannonball still rests in the brick wall of the Thomas Nelson house hundreds of years later.

The contrast between Benedict Arnold and Thomas Nelson came to mind as I was reflecting on the contrast between Mary and Judas Iscariot in this passage. Indeed, this passage is a study in contrasts, as we see people respond to Jesus after the amazing miracle of Lazarus' raising and just before His triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday.

### **I. A Curious Crowd & Plotting Pharisees**

After Jesus raised Lazarus, he went away from the Jerusalem area to a town called Ephraim, some 13 miles northeast of Jerusalem. When exactly Jesus raised Lazarus and how long he remained in Ephraim we don't know, but now, about a week before Passover, Jesus returns to the Jerusalem area, going to Bethany, as He had often done before.

Just before Jesus returns to the area, the crowds start gathering for the Passover. Many people come to Jerusalem a week early, to purify themselves, preparing spiritually and ceremonially for the biggest annual celebration in the Jewish calendar. These people would come and offer sacrifices in the Temple and perhaps take vows, to ready themselves to gather for the national worship festival. As the crowds gathered, they wondered if Jesus was in the area yet. They even began to speculate whether He would come at all, knowing that the religious leaders were angry with Him and seeking Him.

To this curious crowd, the plotting Pharisees made known they were indeed seeking Jesus. They issued an edict, calling for any good Jew who knew Jesus' whereabouts to immediately report them. They intended to arrest this Galilean troublemaker as early as possible, probably to avoid an open and public confrontation during the Passover. Interestingly, both Matthew and Mark tell us that they did not want to arrest Jesus during the Passover festival, to avoid a riot among the people. So, these leaders wanted to arrest Him either before or after the festival; of course, Jesus was in control of the timing, not them, and He fully intended to lay down His life at Passover as the Passover lamb.

Jesus Himself arrives six days before the Passover, making His way from Ephraim to Jericho and then up to Bethany. The identification of Bethany has changed now, because of the great miracle Jesus has done. It was Bethany, home of Mary and Martha and Lazarus, but now it's Bethany, "*where Lazarus was, whom Jesus had raised from the dead.*"

### **II. Extravagant Worship**

John tells us, "*they gave a dinner for him there. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those reclining with him at table.*" The parallel passages describing this dinner in Matthew 26 and Mark 14 are interesting because they do not name Mary as the woman who anoints Jesus, nor do they give the reason why she does so. They do, however, give us the name of the man who hosted the dinner in his house, Simon the Leper.

We don't know who Simon the Leper is, only that it would seem that Jesus had healed him of leprosy. Some have speculated that he was Mary, Martha & Lazarus' father, who had left the home to live in a leper colony, until Jesus healed him and restored him to his family. That's possible, and it would explain why Martha was serving, but it's also possible that Simon was just a neighbor and that Martha was serving because that's what Martha does. She serves.

Whoever Simon was, the dinner is given in honor of Jesus, and two of the men at the table – Simon and Lazarus – had both been miraculously healed by Him. This was a risky dinner, to host and celebrate Jesus when a standing arrest warrant has been issued for Him. But these men and women have reason to be thankful, thankful enough to take real risk to honor Jesus. What risk do we take to honor Jesus? If we have been brought from death to life by His miraculous, life-giving call, what honor and thanks are we giving, at what cost and what risk to ourselves?

Mary comes into the room and takes her customary place, at the feet of Jesus, and then she does something extraordinary, something extravagant beyond reason, to the point of scandal: *“Mary therefore took a pound of expensive ointment made from pure nard, and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped his feet with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.”*

Mary takes a pound of expensive ointment made from pure nard – the actual measure is a Roman litra, from which we get our word Liter, but which is between 11 & 12 ounces, very large for a bottle of expensive perfume. The oil is made from pure nard. Nard is a flower which grows only in the Himalayas of Northern India and Nepal, at high elevation. As with many rare, expensive and desirable things, much imitation nard or diluted nard was available on the market, but John specifies that this is expensive, pure nard.

Matthew and Mark tell us Mary anointed Jesus' head with the oil, while John tells us she anointed His feet. Which is it? Well, it seems clear that it's both. In fact, in Matthew 26:12, Jesus says, *“In pouring this ointment on my body, she has done it to prepare me for burial.”* So, Mary takes almost 12 ounces of undiluted oil of nard and anoints Jesus head to toe. John focuses on Jesus' feet because the feet were dirty, so unclean that the lowest household servant was given the job of washing them, and also probably because John is preparing us for what Jesus will do for His disciples in a few days.

Mary pours out this extravagant gift so completely that Mark tells us she breaks the alabaster jar, itself a precious object, in order to empty all of her extravagance on Jesus. Not only that, but having anointed Jesus so abundantly, Mary then wiped His feet with her hair, something that was undignified to the point of scandal. Women only let down their hair in private, and Mary is wiping Jesus' feet with her hair.

If Simon and Lazarus and others are taking a risk to honor Jesus in thankfulness for what He has done for them, Mary is going above and beyond, showing us what true worship is. She is not concerned about expense or convenience or dignity or anything. She loves her Lord and she gives all of her best and serves and worships in unrestrained love and adoration. This is true, self-forgetting, Christ-magnifying worship, and the effect of it is so powerful that the whole house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.

What a contrast Mary is, not only to Judas Iscariot, but sadly to most believers today. We are so tepid, so restrained and so lukewarm in our worship. We hold back, we count the cost, we avoid worship when it's inconvenient, we worry about what other people around us might think, we fear being undignified. True worship flows from a heart so powerfully touched and changed by the grace of Jesus, it responds with abandon, with adoration, with humility, with self-forgetfulness, with extravagance, with everything we have for everything He is and has done for us!

### III. Excessive Greed

This kind of worship is not understood or appreciated by all. Some will always object to the irrationality of worship. In this case, Judas Iscariot leads the chorus of nay-sayers. Matthew and Mark make it clear that the other disciples actually join Judas in his objection: *“Why was this ointment not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?”*

Judas' objection sounds so practical, so reasonable, so compassionate, so level-headed and even godly. This perfumed oil was worth a year's wages – think about that, a full year's wages! Yet his objection is just a front. John tells us up front that Judas is going to betray Jesus, and then he reveals Judas' real motivation: *“He said this, not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief, and having charge of the moneybag he used to help himself to what was put into it.”*

Judas didn't love the poor. He loved money. He loved money more than Jesus, and his love of money led him into all kinds of evil, from shaming a beautiful act of worship to stealing money from the Lord's treasury to betraying his Lord for 30 pieces of silver. Our culture loves money. It's the one thing we all seem to agree on, despite political and ideological differences. The only bill Republicans and Democrats can unite behind is one that spends more money. The people best known and most admired in our culture are those who make lots of money. Our definitions of success and happiness are tied to wealth. The love of money leads our hearts astray into idolatry and wickedness, just as surely as it did to Judas.

One example of how this happens, ironically, comes from the way people will mis-use Jesus' words to Judas here: *“Leave her alone, so that she may keep it for the day of my burial. <sup>8</sup> For the poor you always have with you, but you do not always have me.”* Some people have taken these words – “the poor you always have with you” – as an excuse to neglect caring for the poor! And why do they want to neglect caring for the poor? So they can spend more of their money on themselves, not so they can pour it out at the feet of Jesus.

So what does Jesus mean by these words? Well, the first sentence is difficult to translate accurately from the Greek, because it sounds like Jesus is saying that Mary is going to keep some of the oil to anoint Him on the day of His burial. But it's obvious that she has poured it all out already. It's probably better to understand the purpose link here as Jesus saying that Mary has kept this for the day of His burial, and it is fitting for her to use it now, because He is about to die. In this case, the New International Version

probably gets the sense of the meaning right when it translates Jesus' words as "*Leave her alone. It was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial.*"

Then, Jesus says that it is more important at this moment for His coming death and burial to take precedence over the care for the poor. This is rather bold of Jesus, and no one else would have been right to make such a statement. Because He is the Lord, His worship and His kingdom agenda take priority. Just as some people have twisted these words of Jesus to justify not caring for the poor, so also some people have placed care for the poor above the worship of Jesus and the advance of His kingdom. Many good Christian charities have grown less distinctly Christian and less concerned with Christ's kingdom and honor over the years.

So Jesus is calling us to the right priorities. We are to love the Lord first with all of our heart, mind, soul and strength, and then we are to love our neighbor as ourselves. We are to do both, but we are never to reverse the order.

#### **IV. Extraordinary Hatred**

Judas' excessive greed and distorted perspective on Mary's act of devotion prepares us for an even uglier and more twisted perspective: the chief priests' deep hatred of Jesus and resentment of Lazarus:

*When the large crowd of the Jews learned that Jesus was there, they came, not only on account of him but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. <sup>10</sup> So the chief priests made plans to put Lazarus to death as well, <sup>11</sup> because on account of him many of the Jews were going away and believing in Jesus.*

The large crowd gathering for Passover had been curious about Jesus at the end of chapter 11. They weren't sure if He was going to come to the Passover at all. Now that they learn He has indeed come, and that He is with Lazarus, the man He reportedly raised from the dead, they flock to Him.

These people are mostly curious. They have heard much about Jesus, and now about Lazarus, and they just have to see for themselves. Bethany is only two miles from Jerusalem, just on the other side of the Mount of Olives, and so they stream to the village to investigate things for themselves: Is Jesus really there? What is He like? Is this Lazarus guy really alive? Was he really dead? Is it all just rumor and speculation or is this Jesus really as great as some people say He is?

The chief priests are deeply threatened. Not only are people physically moving away from the Temple mound, where they hold sway and make lots of money, but they are flocking to see a man who was raised from the dead by another man who called Himself "the Resurrection and the Life." The chief priests were Sadducees, and they did not believe in the Resurrection of the Dead. They were also not generally waiting for Messiah either. The lay people were more influenced by the Pharisee party, which did believe in the Resurrection and was eagerly waiting for Messiah. So Jesus, claiming to be both Messiah and Resurrection, is a deep and dangerous threat to these chief priests.

The chief priests have already conspired together with the Pharisees, normally their enemies, to have Jesus put to death. Now the chief priests decide they need to add Lazarus to their list. They can't effectively deny the Resurrection with a man walking around who has been raised from the dead!

How deep the hatred of these Jewish leaders must be! They are not only willing to have an innocent man put to death to protect their position, but they will also now plot to murder another innocent man. We have no evidence that the chief priests even acted on these desires, and we don't know for sure what happened to Lazarus, except that we can be sure he is with the Lord now, and his body will be raised permanently on the Last Day.

Yet John's account of the chief priests' hatred of Lazarus does explain why those who reject Jesus so often lash out in anger at His followers. We have all been raised to life by the powerful voice of Jesus, and we all testify to His life-giving power. Each one of our lives, transformed by His grace, testifies to the world that it is wrong to reject Jesus, for He is the Savior and Lord. So, the world hates believers and wishes to silence them.

Notice the final words of today's passage: The world's hatred cannot silence or stop Jesus' kingdom: "*So the chief priests made plans to put Lazarus to death as well, **because on account of him many of the Jews were going away and believing in Jesus.***"

Many of the Jews left the Temple area, walked to Bethany, listened to Jesus and came to salvation. As Jesus had said, "*My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand.*"  
– John 10:27-28, ESV

### **Conclusion:**

The person and power of Jesus calls for a real response – not a lukewarm curiosity or a half-hearted, self-serving semi-worship. The words of Jesus to the Church at Laodicea from Revelation 3 seem appropriate for us to hear –

*'I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were either cold or hot! 16 So, because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth. 17 For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing, not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. 18 I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire, so that you may be rich, and white garments so that you may clothe yourself and the shame of your nakedness may not be seen, and salve to anoint your eyes, so that you may see. 19 Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline, so be zealous and repent. 20 Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me.*

Jesus is saying this to His church, not His enemies. If our works are lukewarm, our worship half-hearted, the light of our testimony hidden under a bushel-basket, we need to repent. Jesus has everything we need, and He calls us to Himself. Realize we are indeed wretched, pitiable, poor, blind and naked.

Nothing we have, that we're holding so tightly to, is worth anything. Jesus has it all. How eagerly we should turn to Him, and how lovingly He stands, waiting to receive us and eat with us.

Let us not be like cold, calculating, self-serving Judas, but may Jesus make our hearts more like Mary and her alabaster jar of expensive ointment, finding our place at the feet of Jesus, broken and poured out in unabashed love for Him!