

JESUS ANOINTED AT BETHANY

John 12:1-11

Key Verse: 12:3

“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.”

In this passage Jesus is anointed by Mary at Bethany. Let’s study purely what John’s gospel says about it. We can learn from Mary how to worship Jesus. Most of all, we learn that Jesus is the Son of God. Jesus died for our sins, was buried, and rose again to give us eternal life and the kingdom of God. Let’s learn how to worship Jesus, the Son of God.

First, a resurrection dinner in Jesus’ honor (1-3).

Look at verse 1. “Six days before the Passover, Jesus arrived at Bethany, where Lazarus lived, whom Jesus had raised from the dead.” As we have studied throughout John’s gospel, Jesus lived on God’s time schedule. According to that time schedule, Jesus had six days left before his death. For at this Passover Jesus would become the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. As Jesus entered Bethany, he knew he was going to die soon. But he was not sorrowful or fearful. He was victorious and joyful because Jesus is the resurrection and the life. Jesus might have been singing, “Go ahead, drive the nails in my hand... because I’ll rise again...” Jesus wants us to live with resurrection faith. Even though we face real problems and dangers, we can always have victory through resurrection faith. It is because our destination is the kingdom of God, where we live forever with our Lord Jesus Christ. Last year our dear coworker, Missionary Moody Kim, was assaulted and almost went to heaven ahead of us. But God spared his life. Now he says, “Life is tough, but God is good and Jesus is the resurrection and the life.” He is smiling, joyful and victorious. When we have Jesus, we have victory every day, no matter what the situation may be.

Look at verse 2. “Here a dinner was given in Jesus’ honor. Martha served, while Lazarus was among those reclining at the table with him.” The family was so thankful to Jesus for raising Lazarus from the dead. Now Lazarus was there, laughing and eating, right in front of them. They were so happy to have him back. They were even happier to realize the deep, deep love of Jesus. They realized that Jesus’ love was stronger than death. They knew Jesus was their good shepherd who would lead them safely to the kingdom of God. The dinner party was a foretaste of the victorious wedding supper of the Lamb in the kingdom of God.

The family members expressed their love and gratitude toward Jesus, each in their own way. Martha served, as usual. Martha was active, decisive and hardworking. She enjoyed tackling big serving jobs. This time she must have outdone herself. She sent the most beautiful invitation cards, which read: “To our friends who came to mourn with us the loss of Lazarus: While we truly appreciate your tears, they were unnecessary. In case you haven’t heard, Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead! He is alive! We will have a dinner to honor Jesus and celebrate Lazarus’ resurrection this Sunday at 6:00 p.m. sharp. Jesus will be there, as will Lazarus. It is the chance of a lifetime to see the Messiah and to talk to one who came back from the dead. RSVP.” In addition, Martha organized the servants, cleaned the house, went shopping for the prime cuts of beef, prepared the food and so on. She might have been like Missionary Monica Mun in character.

Lazarus was at the table reclining with Jesus. There was no trace of any sickness in him. He looked strong and vibrant. He had inner peace and his face radiated with life. He expressed his love and thanks to Jesus through testimony. Perhaps he repeated again and again, “I was dead, but you gave me new life. Thank you Jesus. Glory to God. Amen.” The dinner guests were hanging on the edge of their seats, hoping Lazarus would describe his death and resurrection in detail.

Then there was Mary. She was quiet and seems to be youngest. She was usually overshadowed by Martha. But Mary’s heart was almost bursting with love for Jesus and deep thanksgiving. Suddenly Mary did something dramatic. Look at verse 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.” Let’s think deeply about Mary’s action.

In the first place, there is the meaning of the perfume. It was made of pure nard, probably imported from eastern India. It was not some cheap smelly colored water from the local drugstore; it was top of the line, imported, like a fine French perfume costing four hundred dollars an ounce. For a woman, perfume makes an identity statement. It says, "This is me." Women want to leave a personal impression through their unique fragrance. When Mary poured this perfume on Jesus it was a very personal act of love.

This perfume was not only Mary's signature, it was also something of great value to Mary. By pouring it on Jesus, Mary was confessing that Jesus was most precious to her. To those who truly know Jesus, he is more precious than anything else. There have been so many who have sacrificed joyfully to express their love for Jesus. Right here in our midst there is Missionary Joseph and Maria Ahn. We can see every day how much they love each other. But both of them love Jesus most. So shortly after their marriage, for nine years they lived in separate places to serve Jesus, overcoming their desire for a sweet home together. Maria Ahn lived in Korea and shepherded many students who later became missionaries. Concurrently, Joseph Ahn pioneered Guatemala, Mexico and Spain as a Korean diplomat missionary. It was not easy for them. Sometimes when Missionary Joseph looked at the moon, he saw the face of Missionary Maria Ahn and became very sentimental. But God used them preciousely to spread the gospel. I cannot say everything about their sacrificial lives here; it requires a book, perhaps a major motion picture. We will see it in heaven. Let's remember that when Mary poured her perfume on Jesus' feet she gave her treasure to Jesus.

In the second place, there is the way Mary offered the perfume. This kind of perfume was usually used sparingly, just a drop behind the ear, or on the wrist. One bottle should last for many years. But Mary poured the entire pint, all sixteen ounces, on Jesus' feet all at once. Mary's act was extravagant, beyond reason or practicality. Mary wanted Jesus to know how precious he was to her. Mary gave her heart to Jesus, pouring out her affection without limit. It was her act of worship.

In the third place, Mary wiped Jesus' feet with her hair. Mary's act was the outpouring of her whole heart to Jesus. And yet, it was not an expression of unbridled emotion. Mary deeply realized that her best treasure was not worthy of Jesus. So Mary poured the perfume on his feet, in a humble expression. Mary was really reverent. Then she wiped his feet with her hair. To a woman, hair is another signature element of her personality. St. Paul says that it is her glory. Women can easily spend hours washing, conditioning, treating, curling, and styling their hair. Yet Mary wiped Jesus' feet with her hair. She meant that her greatest glory was to serve Jesus, no matter how humbly.

Mary's act of worship is exemplary. But we must think about her motivation. Why did she do this? First of all, she was worshiping the Son of God. When Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, she saw God in Jesus. She saw the Son of God who gives life, even to the dead. Jesus was not just a friend of the family, or a father-like shepherd, or a wonderful rabbi. Jesus is God. Secondly, Mary had resurrection faith. She saw life after death and the kingdom of God. Mary was no longer bound by temporal things of the world. When she believed in Jesus, she had eternal life. So she could pour out her earthly treasure freely. Thirdly, there is a note of repentance in Mary's worship. She realized she had been so wrong to doubt his love. It was a sin that had grieved Jesus' heart. Mary was truly sorry for her doubt and repented sincerely.

It is most important for each of us to realize that Jesus is the Son of God who gives life. We must accept his love personally. Then we can worship Jesus with great affection, resurrection faith, and sincere repentance. The outer expression varies. Some offer their hard work, some their testimony, some their treasure. We should freely worship Jesus according to our personal faith. Further, I would like to suggest that one-to-one Bible study ministry be regarded as an act of worship.

John's gospel reveals that Jesus taught the Bible one-to-one to many kinds of people. Jesus shepherded people with divine love until they met God personally. We should follow Jesus' example. This requires heart devotion and the sacrifice of time and money. Sometimes people whom we have loved sacrificially leave our ministry and go elsewhere. We are tempted to feel sorry about this. But our sacrifice is not a waste. It is our worship given to Jesus.

By the way, what happened to Jesus' feet? The feet of Jesus, which Mary had treated with such great affection and honor, were later nailed to the cross. A spike was driven through them. Mary watched that event in shocking detail. We can imagine how she felt. However, God raised Jesus from the dead. God exalted him to the highest place and made him King of kings and Lord of lords. In Revelation 1:15a, John describes him in glory, saying, "His feet were

like bronze glowing in a furnace....” What is done for Christ turns into heavenly glory for the children of God. The person we care for who seems never to change will someday bear the likeness of Christ. Let’s carry out one-to-one Bible study with the attitude of worship and the hope of glory.

Second, evil Judas Iscariot loved money more than Jesus (4-6).

As Mary was performing her beautiful act of worship, the scene was interrupted by a sharp objection. One of Jesus’ disciples, Judas Iscariot, spoke up: “Why wasn’t this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year’s wages.” On the surface, Judas’ words sounded reasonable. But John points out that his motive was evil. He wanted to sell the perfume and keep the proceeds for himself. It is shocking that a disciple of Jesus could have such an evil mind in the very presence of Jesus. Yet it happened. Judas did not see Jesus as the Son of God. Judas did not value Jesus more than a few ounces of perfume or some money. In the end he would betray Jesus for thirty silver coins. Then he would commit suicide and suffer eternal condemnation in the fiery lake of burning sulfur. We must examine our hearts. If we despise the pure worship of Jesus, something is wrong. If we love money more than Jesus we will betray Jesus in the end.

Third, Jesus defends Mary and blesses her offering (7-11).

Judas tried to make Mary’s sincere act of worship look foolish. True worship of Jesus often evokes strong opposition from religious hypocrites. True worship of Jesus evokes criticism from selfish people who hate sacrifice. Judas’ clever words poisoned the atmosphere of worship. Now the other disciples could have become calculative and critical. How would Jesus see this event? How would Jesus respond? First, Jesus said, “Leave her alone.” Jesus defended Mary and her right to worship him freely. When we give our all to Jesus he will defend us with his life and with all the forces of heaven. Jesus’ word pierced the hearts of all the disciples and they began to shiver. They knew Jesus was serious. Then Jesus honored Mary’s act.

Look at verse 7 again. “‘Leave her alone,’ Jesus replied. ‘It was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial.’” Jesus revealed God’s purpose for Mary’s perfume. Mary had been saving this perfume, not really knowing what it was for. When she offered it to Jesus, it was simply her expression of worship. But according to Jesus, God had a great purpose for this perfume, far beyond Mary’s intention. It was God’s anointing of Jesus’ body for his burial. It became part of God’s eternal redemptive history. We don’t always know how Jesus will use our offering. But when we offer like Mary did, Jesus is pleased to give it eternal value in his world salvation work.

It is a great blessing to be used in God’s eternal redemptive history. Apart from gaining the salvation of our souls and an inheritance in the kingdom of God, it is the greatest blessing we can receive. When Mother Barry went to Korea as a missionary in 1955, she didn’t know exactly how God would use her life. But she was ready to serve in any capacity that the Lord wanted and she studied Korean diligently. The Lord accepted her sacrifice of everything, including the most precious thing, and used her so mightily as a Bible teacher and shepherd for Korean students and a coworker for Dr. Samuel Lee for 40 years. Now the fruit of her life has spread all over the world and she has become a mother of nations in our generation.

We can imagine how much Jesus was encouraged by Mary’s act. It was because it mirrored what God would do with Jesus. Jesus was about to die on a cross for the sin of the world. Jesus was about to be broken and poured out, shedding his lifeblood for sinners. Jesus was God’s one and only Son. Jesus is God’s greatest treasure. Yet God poured out his Son’s lifeblood for sinners. Jesus’ blood is holy and sinless. Jesus’ blood is eternal and has life-giving power. Jesus’ blood can cleanse any sin and heal any sinner and make him a holy child of God. God lavished his love on us by pouring out the blood of Jesus for each of us. 1 John 3:1 says, “How great is the love the Father has lavished on us that we should be called children of God.” God’s love for us meant Jesus had to die. No one could really understand. But Mary recognized him as the Son of God. Mary loved him enough to pour out her treasure. Jesus was greatly encouraged at this critical moment.

Look at verse 8. “You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me.” Jesus said we will always have the poor among us. We can serve the poor anytime. However, there should be a priority in the minds of Jesus’ disciples. We must love Jesus first and we must love Jesus fervently. Only then will our service for others, including the poor, have any real and lasting value.

As the dinner party progressed, word spread that Jesus was there. Many people wanted to see him. Many also wanted to see Lazarus. The power of resurrection was spreading all over the area and many were putting their faith in Jesus. This made the chief priests very upset and they decided to kill Lazarus as well. They wanted to stop the spread of the gospel by any means.

In today's passage we learn that Jesus is the Son of God. Jesus is the most precious to God. Yet God gave his precious one and only Son as the Lamb of God to save us from our sins. When we accept Jesus we are saved. We must also become sacrificial people who learn to give our best to Jesus. May God help each of us to identify our own treasure, give it to Jesus, and be used precious in his work for his glory and honor.