

Summertime! Season for vacation, recreation, leisure, travel. I hope you have a fun and memorable summer. But of course, having fun is not the most important thing you will do this summer.

I hope you're still reading your Bible regularly, like you planned to do 6 months ago. If not, this is a great time to reassert yourself, establish that habit, and let God speak into your life through His word every day. You can still redeem the second half of 2017 that way. But actually, reading your Bible is not the most important thing you each day.

I hope you're growing as a Christian—growing in the fruit of the Spirit, growing in holiness, growing in obedience to God. That's important. But actually, growing as a Christian is not the most important measure of your spiritual life.

I hope this study in John's gospel has deepened your faith in Jesus. After all, that's what it's written: "so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in His name" (Jn 20:30-31). John wrote this book so that you would believe and your faith would grow deeper and stronger. But surprisingly, your faith is not the most important aspect of your relationship with God.

The most important thing you could do this summer, the most important part of each day, the most important measure of your spiritual life, the most important aspect of your relationship with God is... Well, what IS our highest duty? Love. To LOVE GOD with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. This is your first order of business, your number one priority, the most important aspect of your life.

John 12 brings us to a story of pure and powerful love for Jesus. It's challenging—good for those of us who have become distracted and less devoted than we should be (all of us!). It's clarifying, helping us measure our love and offering us specific standards. It's inspiring, moving us to a deeper level of love for Jesus even as it convicts and clarifies.

This story of Jesus, Mary, and Judas confronts us with four questions, all

probing our heart about our love for Jesus—questions I can't answer for you, questions I won't even try to illustrate or apply for you. Mary's act of reckless and extravagant love was not something Jesus commanded, nor is anything like it scripted out for us in the rest of Scripture. Furthermore, Mary's act required Jesus' physical presence and thus cannot possibly be replicated by us today, so its application in our lives is going to look different from person to person. ...all of which means that I am completely dependent on the Holy Spirit and your own conscience to work out the answers to these four questions for yourself.

The story opens at a dinner party (v2)—Martha served, Lazarus was there. As always, John is careful to mark the setting for us on the Jewish calendar—this time the upcoming festival was Passover (v1). This is the 3rd and final Passover John mentions.

Passover is by far the biggest event of the year in Jerusalem. The city would quintuple in size from 50,000 to 250,000, with all the pilgrims flooding into the city for the annual religious festival (11:55). The end of chapter 11 tells us there's an added restlessness in the city this year, a subsurface rumbling among the people. All Jerusalem feels the tension, an apprehensive kind of anticipation that something significant is about to happen with Jesus. Everybody is looking for Him, wondering if He'll show up (v56), fully aware that their religious leaders have had enough and want to stop Him (v57). Verse 1 tells us the dinner party took place in Bethany, which was only 2 miles from Jerusalem. No doubt, at least a tiny element of fear had touched this group of Jesus' friends and followers.

If you know the rest of the story, you know they have good reason to be afraid. Jesus is mere days from capture, literally hours from the cross. In a week, He'll be in the tomb. But you mustn't think He's unaware of or disturbed by the growing threat against His life. He is there on purpose. Notice the connection between chapters 11 & 12:

11:57-12:1 *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. ¹ Six days before the Passover, Jesus therefore came to Bethany, where Lazarus was, whom Jesus had raised from the dead.*

Some English versions leave it out, but do you see the logical connecting

word the Holy Spirit uses in verse 1? “Jesus therefore came to Bethany.” God is ordering these events, and Jesus is obedient to His plan. He comes to Bethany fully aware they’re planning to take Him. He’s not there by mistake. He doesn’t conveniently fall into their hands. He is deliberately heading to the cross.

Verse 2 says Lazarus was “reclining with [Jesus] at the table.” It’s a reference to the custom in this culture of lying on couches during a meal, reclining on one side with head toward the table and feet extended directly outward (cf. 13:23).

Into this scene walks Mary, Martha & Lazarus’s sister. Verse 3 says she’s carrying “a pound of expensive ointment made from pure nard,” which she then uses to “anoint the feet of Jesus.” John lays particular stress upon the value of this item: “a pound of expensive ointment.” Matthew and Mark include the same story, and they likewise draw attention to the great value of this offering: “very costly” (Mk 14:3), “very expensive” (Mt 26:7). Obviously what stood out to the disciples when they recalled this moment was the sheer worth of this ointment.

And rightly so. “Nard” was a fragrant oil derived from the root and stem of a plant which grows on the slopes of the Himalayas in northern India. It was strong enough in its original form that sometimes it was diluted to go further and be more affordable. But not this bottle. This was “pure nard,” undiluted, unmixed. And not just an ounce or two. John says it was a pound—in Roman measure, 12 ounces. Imagine how many plants it took to produce 12 ounces of this precious oil—how many workers labored to procure it, how many weeks it was in transit from India to Palestine. It’s origin, purity, and volume point to its great value. Judas sees this bottle and estimates (v5) it could have been sold for 300 denarii = 300 days’ wages = essentially a year’s income for a common worker. Minimum wage in CO is \$9.30/hour x 8 hours/day x 300 work days/year = \$22,320. There is no doubt the most valuable possession in the house. ...which brings us to our first question: ***Do you love Jesus more than your greatest treasure?***

Mary took this incredibly valuable treasure and simply poured it out on Jesus. She didn’t use it for any practical purpose. No meal provided, no need met, no value added. Nothing. Often nard was used in preparing a

corpse for burial, a use Jesus alludes to in v7. This family has just had a burial a short time earlier, yet this bottle was unbroken. Mary hadn’t even used this on her brother. But on Jesus, she poured it all out. ***Do you love Jesus more than your greatest treasure?***

Verse 3 goes on to tell us she “anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped his feet with her hair.” No doubt a pound of ointment was far too much for only Jesus’ feet. In fact, Matthew and Mark tell us she poured it on His head, and in those accounts, Jesus says she “anointed my body.” Likely then, Mary poured this bottle all over Jesus, from head to foot, running down His hair, soaking into His clothing, and washing His feet as she dried them with her hair. But the feet are John’s focus, no doubt anticipating the foot washing Jesus will perform on the disciples in the next chapter. At the very least, the Holy Spirit is drawing our attention to her humility and love, regardless of social conventions.

A woman unbinding her hair would have caught the attention of everyone in the room – no more conversation, not a sound at the table. A woman’s hair in that era was her glory (1 Cor 11:15). Jewish women did not let down their hair in public, just like teachers did not act like slaves by washing their followers’ feet. But propriety was the least of Mary’s concerns in this moment. She was going to honor Jesus the best way she could regardless of financial or social cost to herself. ...which leads to our next question: ***Do you love Jesus more than your personal dignity?***

Lest you somehow think this event went unnoticed, John tells us (v3) “The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.” Of course it was. As soon as Mary broke open this bottle, the effect was instant and pervasive. When she poured it out on Jesus’ head and clothes and feet, the aroma filled not just the dining room but the entire building. There was no hiding what she had done. This was no secret act of worship. Everyone saw her, no doubt some were scandalized, and at least one publicly criticized her. But that was nothing to Mary. She lavished Jesus’ feet with her most personal glory. ***Do you love Jesus more than your personal dignity?***

Judas instantly reacts:

v5 *"Why was this ointment not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?"*

It's a reasonable suggestion, even a spiritual-sounding one: "It's fine if you want to honor Jesus, but isn't this a little much? I mean, there are incredible needs in the world, people right here in this town. Can't you do both—show Jesus you love Him in a less extravagant way *and still* take care of this important ministry?"

Of course you can. The force of the logic is irrefutable. But Jesus doesn't buy it:

v8 *"The poor you will always have with you, but you do not always have me."*

He has no problem with Mary's extravagance. Not a word of condemnation. In fact, He even pits Mary's act of love against social concern for the poor. If you've been involved in any type of ministry for any length of time, you know why He does. Because so often, serving God is one of the greatest rivals in our hearts to loving God. ...which brings us to our third question: ***Do you love Jesus more than your favorite ministry?***

Jesus makes the statement in v8 so matter-of-factly: "The poor you will always have with you, but you do not always have me." His words sound heartless and arrogant—elevating Himself so far above the poor that way. But only if you forget who He is. Only someone who is due the same honor as God the Father can say this (cf. 5:23). Only someone of that stature can pit love for Himself against service to others. Sometimes our service, which meets real needs, masks a spirit that knows nothing of real worship. ***Do you love Jesus more than your favorite ministry?***

Verse 6 tells us there was more going on in Judas's heart than mere pragmatism:

v6 *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 actually wasn't even motivated by concern for others. Judas loved money. He loved money so much, he stole from Jesus' own supply. When he saw Mary pour out a year's wage in one reckless gesture, he

couldn't help himself: "What?! Why? What a waste!" He wasn't thinking about a missed opportunity for the poor. He was thinking about a missed opportunity for himself. He sees no worth in Jesus; Judas sees worth only in money. It's what drove him to betray Jesus. And ultimately it consumed him. ...which brings us to our fourth question: ***Do you love Jesus more than your secret sin?***

See, Judas had a secret. Outwardly, he looked just like the rest of the disciples—preaching, performing miracles, following Jesus. Nobody could tell his heart was controlled by something else entirely. But it was. He probably thought everything was OK—nobody knew, God was evidently using his life... but all the while he was holding on to this unconfessed, unrepented, unforsaken sin. What about you? ***Do you love Jesus more than your secret sin?***

Why did Mary love so much and Judas not? How did she get to the place where her love was such a challenge to us still today?

v7 *Jesus said, "Leave her alone, so that she may keep it for the day of my burial."*

Obviously Mary hasn't kept it; she just spilled it out all over Jesus' body and clothing. Jesus is contrasting her use of it with Judas' suggestion of selling it to make provision for the poor. He's saying she has held on to this family treasure (rather than sold it) for just such an occasion as this—to pour it out on Him. Why? "for the day of my burial" – i.e., in preparation for/anticipation of Jesus' burial.

See, Mary understands something none of these other people seems to get. She knows He's headed to the cross. Jesus has been predicting His death for some time now. Apparently, Mary has been listening closely and taking His words to heart more than most of Jesus' other followers. She believes Him, and she knows what it means. He truly is going to die. He's going to give His life a ransom for many. He is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. Mary has taken all this to heart.

Furthermore, she knows the antagonism toward Jesus has intensified since He raised her brother Lazarus from the dead. His act of kindness to their family is taking Him down the road to His own destruction. He saved Lazarus's life, only to lose His own. Mary understands all this.

She's taken the time to think it all through—where Jesus is going, what His kindness to her family will cost Him.

All of this overwhelms her with gratitude and affection, and she can't hold back anymore. She can't wait until after dinner. She isn't hoping for a private moment. Her thoughts and feelings overwhelm her and she acts with extravagant abandon. Maybe she is just hoping her friends will understand. More likely, she isn't really thinking about them at all anymore. For all she cares, it's just her and Jesus in this moment.

But the fundamental difference between Mary and the rest of these people isn't her extravagant love in and of itself. Jesus says it's her careful consideration of His death:

▼7 *"Leave her alone, so that she may keep it for the day of my burial."*

Obviously, Mary had given careful consideration to these things. She had taken time—perhaps deliberate time set aside for quiet meditation and prayer, perhaps just the general drift of her thoughts in a moment of stillness during her day—to contemplate the goodness Jesus had shown her family in raising Lazarus, the threat this action posed to His own wellbeing, and His many statements about His own impending death. She was mindful of all of this. Jesus says as much: "She has done this in preparation for the day of my burial." In other words, it was a premeditated action, not a spontaneous impulse. She had thought about this. In fact, I believe this act of devotion is the fruit of Mary's tendency toward contemplation which we see in her elsewhere (Lk 10:38-42).

If we love less than Mary, perhaps it's because we've thought about these things less than Mary. Intention to love is important. But contemplation is required as well.

Have you thought about the worth of Jesus, His goodness to you, and the price He paid to raise you up? I'd like to encourage you to set aside time in the next 24-48 hours to consider all of that. Consider:

- Notice your breathing, the air going in and out of your lungs, the slow and steady beat of your heart. Every breath, every heartbeat is a gift from God. Think of that.
- Notice the exquisite beauty of this day, the glory and grandeur

of those mountains. God, your Savior, made all of it with a word of His mouth.

- Now imagine a violent attacker comes through those doors in the back and starts shooting and the person next to you throws himself in the line of fire and saves your life. Imagine that happening right now and the way you would feel about that person for the rest of your life. He literally gave his life so you could live.

It's highly likely this scent stayed on Jesus' clothes for the rest of the week. In fact, it's quite possible the aroma still lingered in His hair and beard a week later, at His trial and perhaps even as His mangled form was laid in the tomb. A waft of this perfume may have filled Jesus' nostrils as He drew His final breath on the cross—the very last beautiful fragrance He smelled as He surrendered to death.

All this He did for you. What offering of love could be too great to give for Him?

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