

<sup>1</sup> Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. <sup>2</sup> There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those reclining with him. <sup>3</sup> Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, and anointed Jesus's feet with it, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. <sup>4</sup> But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, <sup>5</sup> "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" <sup>6</sup> (He said this not because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) <sup>7</sup> Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. <sup>8</sup> You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

John 12:1-18

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"Mary's Anointing"

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There's an old story about a college sophomore enrolled in an ornithology class—that's the study of birds. Exams for this particular class were notoriously hard, so the young man made what he considered a herculean effort in preparation for the exam. He was therefore stunned when he walked into the classroom to take the exam. There was no blue book, no multiple-choice questions, no test booklet at all—just 25 pictures on the wall. Photos, not of birds, but of birds' feet. The test was to use what he'd learned to identify the birds.

"This is insane," the student protested. "It can't be done."

"It must be done," said the professor. "This is the final."

"I won't do it," said the boy. "I'm walking out."

"If you walk out, you will fail the final."

"Go ahead and fail me," the boy replied, storming towards the door.

"Okay, you have failed," boomed the professor. "What is your name?"

At which point, the boy hiked up his pants legs, kicked off his shoes and called out, "You tell me!"

[Adapted from John Ortberg, *The Life You've Always Wanted*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1997, 209-210.]

You know, I'm thinking that feet probably aren't the best thing for identifying people, are they? I mean, if I was shown pictures of some of your feet, I might be able to distinguish male from female, but that would be about it. And it's not like the FBI has a toeprint database! But there is one who I could recognize, only by looking at the feet. I would know immediately whose feet they were because they have holes in them, where nails pierced through skin and bone to affix him to the cross. If you saw those feet, who'd know instantly who they belonged to as well, wouldn't you?

In our lesson this morning, Jesus doesn't have any holes in his feet yet, but they're coming. Immediately following our lesson for today is the record of Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem—Palm Sunday—which we'll celebrate in a couple of weeks. He's on the road to the cross—it's not even a week away at this point in the Gospel. But for today, we'll concentrate not on feet with holes, but on this act of holiness.

Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus, comes and pours perfume made from pure nard onto Jesus' feet. And Judas criticizes her for it. Now, John seems to think it's vital that we know Judas was stealing from the common purse and cared nothing for the poor. I'm not sure we can take that at face value. Most scholars seem to think that Judas was a zealot – he wants to finance a revolution. He would probably tell you that the best way to help the poor is to throw off Rome. Which means he doesn't know his own history very well. It's more important that you understand John's issues, here.

Remember that Judas is the Greek form of the name Yehudah—one who is from Judah. A Jew. And Iscariot was certainly not his last name—it means ‘the traitor’. In other words, John labels this one as ‘The Jew Traitor’. That’s what his name means. Because John is pretty bitter, you see. By the time John was writing, more than a hundred years after Jesus’ death and resurrection, Christians were enduring enormous persecution from the Romans so “the Jews” kicked them out of the temple for fear of Roman censure. Hence, there’s great animosity between Christian and Jew in John’s community. Much of the anti-Semitism that has plagued us through history can be traced back to John’s gospel, which is why it’s important that we take caution when handling these kinds of phrases.

This story is told in all four gospels, but in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, it’s all of the disciples who are outraged, and I suspect that probably closer to the truth. After all, we don’t see Peter coming up and pouring oil worth 300 denarii on Jesus’ feet. And they’re outraged because they see waste. Let me put this in context for a moment. In Jesus’ time, the average worker made about 1 denarius a day. There are 365 days a year, minus approximately 52 sabbath days in a year, plus assorted other holidays, which means the average worker is making about 300 denarii a year. So this spikenard perfume is worth about a year’s salary. According to Forbes Magazine, in 2022, the average salary for workers in Michigan across all demographics was \$54K a year. That’s the average. Some of us make a lot less than that, and some a lot more. But it gives us a number to work with to make all this real for us. How many of us would pour out a bottle of perfume – even for Jesus – worth \$54K? That’s the kind of money we’re talking about. Just for reference, we feed 72 kids every weekend all school year long for about \$10K. With \$54K, we could probably feed every low-income kid in this district and then some, and all summer, too. So I can’t write off the outrage of those disciples. No, my initial, instinctual reaction numbers me among them. I’ve been there a hundred times. You spent *how much* on that state-of-the-art sound system for your big old sanctuary? You spent *how much* to fix the stained glass? You spent how much on new flooring when the sump pump backed up? I mean, I’m really good at righteous indignation. I can dish it out with the best of ‘em, complete with ‘judgy’ face and the condescending tone. Because I cannot entirely escape being a product of my culture, and my culture is very conscious of the bottom line.

Now, I’m not knocking that. Practicality has its place. The bottom line does matter. But I am not convinced that the events reported in this passage boil down to a question about our financial choices. No critic or commentator will ever convince me that Jesus is saying here that we should go ahead spend money like it grows on trees. Who cares, you can’t take it with you, right? No! You and I both know that’s ludicrous. Jesus talks more about money and how we should use it and view it than any other single social issue—and by a huge margin, too.

Which leads me to believe this isn’t about money. So what is it about then? It’s about recognizing who Jesus is. It’s about love and devotion and gratitude. Remember that in the chapter before this one, we hear about Mary’s brother Lazarus, who died and was buried. Mary was inconsolable in her grief. She was also about to be suddenly bereft in her circumstances. Her sister Martha, the more practical one, got up from her mourning and went to meet Jesus at the outskirts of town, demanding answers and explanations, but not Mary. Mary just weeps.

So you can imagine how she felt when her beloved brother comes stumbling out of the tomb after being dead four days, still wrapped up in his putrid sticky grave-clothes, blinking at the sun. They take him home alive, and Mary senses that something incredible has just happened. She goes to her room, maybe she pries up the floorboard that been nailed down for years, and digs a secret treasure from its hiding place beneath. How she came by such a valuable gift is anyone’s guess. Maybe it was an heirloom of the family. Maybe an investment to protect their earnings. Maybe they were wealthy. We don’t really know. But she takes it out to where Jesus is feasting with companions and friends.

Then she breaks open the seal and pours out the entire contents onto Jesus' feet, massaging that precious oil into calloused feet that walked everywhere in the dusty, arid climate of Israel. And even though she's wiping it up with hair and tears, there'd be a puddle of it left. You'd have smelt that perfume clear down the street. In the immediate vicinity, the fragrance would have been so strong, it would burn a person's nostrils. It would be in every breath, permeating one's clothing, affecting the taste of the food. It'd be there for weeks, if not months. Where once Martha had warned Jesus against opening her brother's tomb, lest the stench of death overwhelm them, it is now the sweet fragrance of life, love, gratitude, and devotion that lingers in the house.

And it's so important that we realize the profound moment this is. Jesus is the Messiah, a title which comes from the Hebrew *mashach*, meaning 'the anointed one'. The Messiah is the one anointed by God to redeem God's people from oppression. Judas thinks that means Rome, but Mary gets it. She anoints the one who redeems from the tyranny of death – the one who strips away the putrefaction of sin. She anoints the Messiah – the liberator of humankind – the one whose throne is a cross, whose crown is thorns, whose wealth is grace, and whose mighty scepter is love incarnate. Before he dies, she tells us who Jesus is. She pours out her life at his feet. She gives no thought to cost or what's in this for her. She isn't rational or reasonable—she simply loves. Her gift is spontaneous, uncalculating, and utterly timely.

Nearly every commentator I read talked about extravagance, many making the point that it's okay to be like Mary—to be extravagant in our love of Christ. But a question popped into my mind that I just couldn't shake. What does it mean to be extravagant? Isn't it defined as excessive, over the top, gaudy, extreme? But that begs a more subtle question: exceeding what? Over the top of what? Extreme, as opposed to what? Normal? Standard? Customary? The expected?

Extravagant assumes a comparison—a comparison that doesn't apply when talking about the goodness of God. Mary has come to pour out her love and devotion and thanksgiving to Jesus. She doesn't need to be told that this is God's own anointed one walking in her midst. And she doesn't bother to stop and calculate the cost when she brings her best to God. She doesn't need to save for a rainy day—not when she knows in her heart and in her gut the life-giving force of Christ. I ask you: is it possible to be extravagant in our love, our devotion, our thanksgiving to God? Is it possible to be excessive, over the top, extreme? In our love, our devotion, our thanksgiving to God, can we really exceed, go over the top, surpass normal, standard, customary, expected? Only if and not unless our normal, standard, customary, expected expression of that love, devotion, thanksgiving is half-hearted, slap-dash, good enough, lackadaisical, withdrawn, half-hazard, feeble, pathetic, mediocre, and second rate. Sadly, our normal expectations for the people of faith are all-too-often just that. Too many have watered down the call and the example that Jesus embodied.

We are called, challenged, to give no less than all we are and all we have—because it's NOT OURS! Our model is Christ, who poured out his life just like Mary poured out that perfume made from pure nard. It is absolute, unbridled, insanity to think we can exceed or outdo God—in generosity, in love, in faithfulness, in purity, in goodness! Extravagant, my eye!

Now sure, I kinda wish Jesus had never said, "The poor you will always have with you," because it's easy to use such words to excuse our apathy and inaction, or even worse, to cynically justify the world as it is. But to do so misses the whole point here. Friends, you're not Mary. No. You're the nard, the perfume of great worth. You can stay bottled up in the dark and turn sour, or you can let God open you and pour you out, releasing the fragrance of gratitude, of devotion, of God's incredible love and grace to permeate the world through you.

Oh Mary, pour away to your hearts content. Let that potent fragrance burn the insides of our nostrils...and our hearts! May we love Christ and others half so well. Amen.