

**John:  
La Perumerie**

**John 12:1-11**

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Last week we looked together at the raising of Lazarus from the dead. We didn't get to it last week due to time, but let me go back for a moment to John 11 and ask the question, "Why it is that John doesn't record anything at all of Lazarus' reaction to being brought back from the dead." He had been dead for four days. Presumably, his soul had gone to heaven. He had experience things, to quote the apostle Paul, "concerning which it was unlawful for him to utter," perhaps. Though I cannot stop wondering that John, perhaps didn't record anything that John had said because maybe what Lazarus had said, was, "Why did You bring me back here?"

There's a wonderful poem, some of you might know it. I remember looking at in School. It's Tennyson's, *In Memoriam*, with 131 verses, but I'm only referring to one verse now. "Behold, a man raised up by Christ, the rest remaineth unrevealed. He told it not, or something sealed, the lips of that evangelist." There's a similar poem, I think, by Robert Browning on Lazarus' resurrection. According to tradition, Lazarus was 30 years old when Jesus raised him from the dead, and he lived for another 30 years or so.

Now, in chapter 12, the next incident in the gospel of John is in Bethany. Jesus, at the end of chapter 11, has been away; He's gone about 15 miles north of Jerusalem for a while, to a place called Ephraim. But now, in chapter 12, He's come back to Bethany, again. We assume sometimes, that because Martha is the one who is serving in this story we will read in a moment, we assume that this is the house of Mary and Martha and Lazarus. Actually, John doesn't say that. He does say that this is Bethany where Lazarus was, but there are parallel stories to this one: in John 12, in Luke 1, in Matthew 1, and Mark. The one in Luke is so different from the one here in John that it *has* to be another incident altogether. It occurs at the beginning of Jesus' ministry and the woman in that case, is described as one who is a sinner. Now, there are traditions and there are interpretations that link all of these stories together, and if you do that you end up having Mary Magdalene and Mary of Bethany as the same person. Sometimes in movies of the life of Jesus you will get that confusion of the identity of Mary Magdalene and that she was an adulteress because of Luke 7 and because of

Mary of Bethany and so on. I tend to think that the incident in Luke 7 is a different story. We've still got two other incidents: one in Matthew and in Mark, and in Matthew and Mark it says that Jesus was in the house—He was in Bethany—but it was in the house of Simon the Pharisee, so if these are the same stories as I tend to think they are, then this isn't Mary and Martha and Lazarus' home in Bethany; this is the home of Simon the Pharisee and there's a celebratory dinner. A meal has been prepared.

Turn with me to John 12:1-11. Hear the word of God.

Jesus therefore six days before the Passover, came to Bethany where Lazarus was whom Jesus had raised from the dead. So they made him a supper there and Martha was serving, but Lazarus was one of those reclining at the table with Him. Mary therefore, took a pound of very costly perfume, of pure nard, and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped His feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. But Judas Iscariot, one of His disciples, who was intending to betray Him said, "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denari and given to poor people?" Now he said this not because he was concerned about the poor but because he was a thief. And as he had the moneybox, he used to pilfer what was put into it. Jesus therefore said, "Let her alone in order that she may keep it for the day of my burial. For the poor you always have with you, but you do not always have Me." The great multitude, therefore of the Jews, learned that He was there and they came not for Jesus' sake only, but that they might also see Lazarus whom He raised from the dead. But the chief priests took council that they might put Lazarus to death also because on account of him, many Jews were going away and were believing in Jesus.

Thus far, God's holy and inerrant word. May He add His blessing to the reading of it. Let's pray together.

*Father, just now as we turn to the Scriptures and to this story in the life of Jesus. Minister to us we pray, by Your Spirit. For Jesus' sake we ask it. Amen.*

It's six days before Passover. That makes it Saturday evening. The Sabbath is finished. Sabbath began on Friday evening and ended at sundown on Saturday. There's a meal prepared in the house, presumably of Simon the Pharisee in Bethany, where Lazarus had been raised from the dead.

### **I. Mary's generosity.**

The first thing I want us to see here is the generosity of what Mary did. I was tempted to say extravagance, and in one sense what she did is extravagant. And that is how Judas saw it. According to the parallels in Matthew and Mark, some

of the other disciples also thought it was extravagant. But let's look at it positively for a minute. It begins with a comment about Martha. Martha is serving. That is why we think it is Martha's house, but it probably isn't. She's serving. She has been in the kitchen and she's running to and fro and this is a beautiful thing. She's serving a Savior. What an extraordinary privilege to serve the Lord Jesus Christ--to do something for Him; to cook a meal for Him, to make some sandwiches for Him, to make some tea or coffee for Jesus. Here's Jesus in a home. This is a home, a dwelling, and people are gathered for a meal. We've all been there. We've all been invited to someone's home for a meal, and you sit around and talk and sip coffee and there's laughter and fellowship and rapport and somebody tells a story, and another one a better story and that, no doubt, was what was taking place here. This was a domestic setting. Jesus knows all about domestic settings. He knows what it's like to be in a home. He knows what it's like to have to prepare a meal. He knows what it is when there's a little bit of tension because people are arriving and the food isn't ready and there isn't enough food and it's not hot enough. He knows all about that; He's been there. This meal is in Jesus' honor. It says so in verse 2. It was for Jesus to honor Him. It was to give Him credit.

But the focus isn't on Martha and it really isn't on Mary, as we shall see. It is on Jesus, but for a minute, John wants us to see something that Mary did. She gives of what she has. Dinner is probably over. Perhaps you've been wondering, "I wonder what they had for dinner?" What do you serve when Jesus is coming for dinner? Some of you go into a panic when the minister comes. Imagine if Jesus was coming to dinner. Dinner is over. Lazarus and some of the other disciples are reclining at the table. This is a table almost with no legs on it. You're lying down, your feet are away from the table, leaning on one side. I don't get it; it's not that comfortable for me, but that's what they did. John is watching; he was there. He was an eyewitness and he saw what was taking place. And then suddenly, Mary of Bethany, Lazarus' sister, Martha's sister does something. Perhaps at first, nobody took any notice. Maybe they casually looked and thought, "What in the world is she doing?" But perhaps the conversation continued but all of a sudden, the room is filled with Chanel No. 5--whatever--a perfume. Everybody is conscious of it. Mary has taken about a pound of very costly perfume. The NIV Bible describes this as a measure of quantity, a liquid quantity, and it says a pint. It's probably a measurement of weight more than it is a measurement of liquid. It's a lot. It's an enormous amount. The parables talk, you remember, about that alabaster box that may have had some sort of neck to it that you actually broke in order to pour out the perfume. It's a pint or about a pound of pure nard. Nard is a plant in India. This is made out of the root and the lower part of the stem of this plant hence spikenard, as it has in the King James Version, I think. It's good stuff. This isn't stuff you buy from Wal-Mart; this is good stuff. This is the most expensive thing that you could possibly buy. It's worth, and Judas has done the reckoning--he's the treasurer--and it is worth about 300 denari, which is about a year's wages. Now, it was interesting looking at all the commentators because it depends where the commentary was written as to what a year's wages would be

in terms of today's value. Some had it at \$10,000, others at \$20,000, others at \$30,000. If the commentary was written in New York, it was at \$40,000 and up it went. It was a lot of money.

Mary gives the best thing that she has. It was the most expensive thing, a treasured thing. It was more than likely a family heirloom. These things sometimes were handed down from one generation to another. Perhaps a little bit of it would be used and then it would be poured into another alabaster box and a seal put on it. It was for burial. It wasn't anything to do with odor or deodorant or any those things. It was death and burial. And Mary has used it. It was probably a family treasure. It was important, perhaps, to Martha and Lazarus as it was to her, but she's used it. It's gone. She's poured it on Jesus. She gives the best thing that she has.

I wonder if I can pause just for a moment. We're thrilled at the response to our Faith Promise for missions. But I wonder if I can make this application. Have you ever given the best thing that you have to Jesus? I wonder if, far too often, we just give the leftovers, the things that we would never miss. And here's Mary, and she's so caught up in her devotion to Jesus Christ that she gives the best thing that she has, the most treasured thing that she has. A year's worth of wages. It was an enormously expensive thing in those times. But more than that, she gives herself.

In one sense, it's easier to write a check than to give yourself to Jesus. It is. It's easy just to put something in the offering plate as it comes around and to think, "Well, that's my love for Jesus taken care of." But here's Mary, and I've been perplexed by some of this. Ministers and preachers fret about their sermons, as they fret about their children. And there's an aspect of this that has puzzled me, because in verse 3, Mary does something very, very strange. John says, "She poured this ointment on Jesus' feet." The other gospel writers, Matthew and Mark, in their parallels, say that she first of all anointed His head and then elsewhere. There was far too much to have just poured on His feet. It went all over Him.

Now, I understand why Matthew and Mark talk about anointing the head, because they want to speak of Jesus as the King, and it would be wholly appropriate to anoint the head. John has something else in mind, and John notes not only the head, but the feet as well. Remember, the next chapter, chapter 13, is the foot washing incident.

What Mary does here is something that was unthinkable. This is something that servants do, touching the feet of Jesus. And then wiping the excess off with hair. Maybe the hair bit was an afterthought. Maybe she suddenly realizes that there's far too much of this stuff, and it's filling the whole room, and she suddenly unplaits her hair, lets it fall, and she starts wiping His feet. It's an extraordinary scene. It's a little on the edge, isn't it. We want to step back from this and just

pass by it, but if you were there and saw it; well, if someone did this to one of our ministers, the elders would be round in a jiffy. She is so caught up in her devotion for Jesus I'm not sure she knew what she was doing. She's oblivious to all around her. It's almost as if she's doing something that may have been appropriate in private, but even when we say that we want to say, "No, it wouldn't even have been appropriate in private."

I was telling the Sunday School this morning of an incident, and there's hardly a day that goes by when I don't think about it. A dear dear lady, she's 101 years young, as she would say. She had two sisters and I would visit them. One day, when I was a young minister, I had been in the ministry maybe a couple of years, and I was a little discouraged and perplexed by certain problems and difficulties that were taking place in the congregation. And Mrs. Spears, she looked me straight in the eye, and she had only one eye, because she'd had cancer in one eye and lost it and had a glass eye, so she had this sort of piercing look when she looked you in the eye. And she said, "Derek, see no one in the picture but Jesus." It was one of those aphorisms, those sayings that sounds a little blasphemous, but I can't tell you how many times I think about that statement. Hardly a day, hardly a week goes by without me thinking about that incident. See no one in the picture but Jesus. And I think that is what Mary is doing here. She sees no one here except Jesus. She sees no one but her Savior. She sees no one here but the Messiah. She's overcome with love and devotion for the One who has raised her brother from the dead, but more than that, He was a family friend, but more than that, He was the Son of God. He was the Lord of Glory incarnate.

I think this forces a question to bubble up to the surface. Do we know anything about this? Do we have any idea what Mary is doing here? To be so overcome with love for Jesus Christ that you would do anything for Him, at whatever cost, no matter how ridiculous it would appear to others, and it did look ridiculous, and extravagant to others. And Mary didn't care. She only had eyes for the Savior. "O love divine, how sweet thou art, when shall I find my willing heart, all taken up by thee. I thirst, I faint, I die to prove the greatness of redeeming love, the love of Christ for me." This is more than just female sentimentality now — men. It's more than that. It's paradigmatic, of how I think it is appropriate for us to be taken up with the love of Christ.

## **II. The wastefulness of what Mary did.**

Secondly, I want us to see this: the wastefulness of what Mary did. That's how Judas saw it. Actually, before we launch into something on Judas, if you read the parallel account in Matthew and Mark, they say that some of the disciples thought exactly the same way as Judas. It wasn't just Judas. But John wants to single out Judas here, because Judas saw it as a waste. It was a colossal waste of money. Judas made the calculation. He had one of these calculators in his head, he was good at math, and John introduces him as the one who would

betray Jesus. He makes the point that “This could have given to the poor.” It could have been sold, the money used for the benefit of the poor. Who can argue with that. Judas is being disingenuous, of course, he had no more concern for the poor than for the Man in the Moon.

And Jesus says something extraordinary: “The poor,” He says, “are always with you. But Me, you do not always have.” What an extraordinary thing to say. If Jesus wasn't the Son of God, if Jesus wasn't the divine Messiah, if Jesus wasn't who He was, wouldn't that be the most insufferably arrogant thing to say? Wouldn't it? Be honest now. And the point is, that He is the Son of God, He is the divine Messiah, He is the Lord incarnate, in their midst, and if Mary was ever going to go anything, now was the time, because He only has a week left and He will be crucified.

John tells us that Judas was the keeper of the moneybag, and he used to put his hand in it. Now, don't make the mistake of running to the end of the story of Judas' life and reading in all of that back here. Because at this point, at this point in the narrative, John of course is writing after the fact, but at this point no one expected Judas. Nobody. And what we have here is a clue as to how spiritual apostasy takes root and grows until it shackles the heart so that there is no possibility of escape. What we have here is a clue as to exactly how spiritual apostasy takes place. The root of bitterness grows in Judas' heart. It begins to manifest itself here, and if left unguarded, unchecked, unmortified, undealt with, his lack of commitment to spiritual disciplines, that it is possible to profess to be a believer - and Judas was one of the twelve disciples. He was one of the apostles. He was one of the faithful band of disciples of our Savior who had been with Jesus now for almost three years — that it's possible to be a professing believer, that it's possible to be a member of the church, that it's possible to be an office bearer in the church, and still be unconverted.

And what triggers his comment? Money. Money. The love of money is the root of all sorts of evil. It's taken a grip on him. He's begun to see it as all-important, all-consuming. He can't see this incident without thinking of how much that was worth. He's become greedy, avaricious.

There's the greatest contrast imaginable here between Judas and Mary. One is given over to the devotion of Jesus, the other is given over to the gratification of self. It's the contrast between selflessness and selfishness. He covets. Do you notice Jesus' reprimand? It's so gentle. “Let her alone,” He says. Let her alone. But that little reprimand, that little public rebuke got to him, I think it got to him, I think it was the catalyst that began a fermentation process in his heart that led to his betrayal of Jesus. He began to hate Him. He began to resent what Jesus had said. You see, it wouldn't have taken a rocket scientist to work out that Jesus didn't have long to live, not if He was coming back to Jerusalem. They were already plotting to kill Him, and then what? What would become of Judas then? And why not insure that he would have the means and the livelihood to survive

the rest of his life in some form of luxury? And here was the opportunity and it was gone. He could have taken that and sold it and kept the money and hidden it, and I think Judas was never able to let it go. And a root of bitterness grew like kudzu. Like kudzu, no matter what you do, it still grows. Within hours of this incident Judas will walk the two miles or so from Bethany into Jerusalem to the high priests and they will say to him, "How much?" Thirty pieces of silver. Half a year's wages; it was a lot of money. It can happen.

The great philosopher, John Ruskin,--well, maybe not that great-- was a Victorian philosopher at the turn of the 19th-20th centuries. He was an influence on the pre-Raphaelite painters. He would love to tell his class of a man who was shipwrecked at sea, and in order to save the treasure he had on board, he tied it in a belt to his waist. And the boat was found at the bottom of the sea, and the treasure, still attached to the man's waist. And Ruskin loved to ask the question, "Ladies and gentlemen. As the man was sinking, did he have the gold or did the gold have him?" Ladies and gentlemen, the gold had Judas because he had no love for Jesus. It was more important to him than Jesus.

### **III. The true meaning of what Mary did.**

Thirdly, the true meaning of what Mary did. In verse seven, we are told that she did it, this is Jesus' interpretation, "She did it to keep it for the day of My burial." The other gospel writers interpret that in this way: she did it as a memorial for His burial. She did it as a kind of anticipation, because she wouldn't be there or something like that. Maybe Mary didn't know what she was doing, but let her do it now because it is useful as a symbol of what is going to happen to Me, and Jesus raises the issue of His burial, of His death. You remember Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea? They will go out and purchase myrrh and aloes, those spices. Enormous quantities of these spices in order to wrap in the linen that would as a kind of shroud over Jesus' body. She did it in anticipation of My burial. She had anointed Jesus for His burial.

And John wants us to see here a deeper story. Because outside the house many, many Jews have come from Jerusalem, it's only a couple of miles away, to Bethany. And they've come to see Lazarus, but they've come also to Jesus, and many of them, look at verse 11, "were believing." The chief priests, verse 10, are plotting not only to kill Jesus, but to kill Lazarus too. And so you've got this contrast. You've got people plotting to kill Jesus, and you've got people who are putting their faith in Jesus.

And John, the author of this story is saying to us something of profound significance. Which is it going to be, my friend? Which side are you on? Which band are you going to follow? Are you going to be with Judas, and these chief priests, plotting to kill Jesus? Is that the group that you are going to follow? Because if you don't love Jesus, if you don't understand what Mary is doing here,

then that's the crowd that you're following.

Or, are you going to be with that group of people who are putting their faith and trust in Jesus Christ? "Jesus I am resting, resting in the joy of what Thou art. I am finding out the greatness of Thy loving heart." And that's what Mary was doing. She was finding out in her own private little way, oblivious of every thing going on around her, she was finding out the greatness of Jesus' loving heart. Because, I think, she caught a glimpse that Jesus was going to die for her, and she took the best thing that she had and she just poured it on Him. See no one in the picture, *no one* in the picture, but Jesus.

Let's pray together.

*Our Father in heaven, as we come to the close of this Your day, we thank You for this Word, we thank You for this beautiful story. We pray for a heart like Mary's--wholly devoted and given over to Jesus Christ, no matter what. No matter what people say. Forgive us, O Lord, for those times when we've been ashamed of You, and may our hearts burst with love for You, more and more and more. For Jesus' sake, Amen.*

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