

"Anointing Jesus for Burial"
John 12:1-8
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Today we will be partaking of the Lord's Supper, and I have chosen our passage today as a meditation to prepare us for that privilege. In our passage today, we read of our Lord's eating supper with a group of friends and disciples. What a blessed privilege it would be to have personal fellowship over a meal with Jesus of Nazareth! Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could somehow travel back in time and participate in this meal at Bethany? Yes, it would seem so, but in reality such is not only not possible but also not necessary. The resurrected Jesus has given us the promise of Revelation 3:20:

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 dine with him, and he with Me."

When we partake of the Lord's Supper, we too dine with Jesus of Nazareth. We too have personal communion with Him. As it says in 1 Corinthians 10:

16 The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ?

Not that Jesus comes to earth physically when we partake of the Lord's Supper. The Son in His localized humanity is now at the right hand of the Father in heaven, and He will not bodily return to earth until the Second Coming. In the interim, Christ does not come to earth in His physical body. Rather, He, through the work of His Holy Spirit, brings us up to heaven to commune with Him in spirit. As it says in Ephesians 2:4-6,

- 4 But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us,
5 even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved),
6 and **raised us up together, and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, ...**

We find the same message taught in Hebrews 12:22-24,

- 22 But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to an innumerable company of angels,
23 to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are registered in heaven, to God the Judge of all, to the spirits of just men made perfect,
24 to Jesus the Mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling that speaks better things than that of Abel.

The passage says not that you will come at some future date, but that you have already come, come to the heavenly city and to Jesus and His saving blood. We today, as we partake of the

Lord's Supper in faith, commune with our Lord in a true and personal fellowship. We do so as the Holy Spirit works faith in our hearts and brings us in spirit to the heavenly city where Jesus now resides.

In our passage today, the disciples and others dine with Jesus. Through the Lord's Supper and through the Holy Spirit who works faith in our hearts, we too will today dine with Jesus, and we will enjoy His presence among us.

There is a second similarity between the event recorded in our passage for today and in our today partaking of the Lord's Supper. As we partake of the Lord's Supper, we will be remembering His death. In our passage today, we read of an act of devotion which anticipated His death.

Let's first look at this act of devotion and set it in its context. Jesus arrived at Bethany just six days before the Passover which would be our Lord's last Passover. Most interpret this to mean that Jesus arrived at Bethany on a Friday, a Friday exactly one week before the day of His crucifixion. The next day after His arrival, which would be the Jewish Sabbath, Jesus had supper there in Bethany with His disciples and friends. The day after that, a Sunday, Jesus traveled to Jerusalem and rode into the city on a donkey, the event we call the Triumphal Entry. The following Thursday, Jesus ate His last Passover with His disciples, and the following Friday, He was crucified.

So here Jesus was at Bethany just a week before His crucifixion. From Matthew and Mark's accounts of this event, we know that

Jesus had supper at the house of one called Simon the Leper. This was probably a leper who had been a leper so long that he came to be called Simon the Leper. Here he was at a public meal and no longer quarantined due to his infectious disease, so He most probably had been miraculously healed by Jesus at some previous time. Also present and eating with Jesus was Lazarus, whom Jesus had raised from the dead just a few weeks before. Martha, Lazarus' sister, was also there, helping to serve the meal.

They were eating and fellowshiping for a time. We are not told what they spoke about, but suddenly something occurred which became the focus of everyone's attention. Mary, the other sister of Lazarus, came into the room with an alabaster jar in her hand. She approached Jesus, who, in accordance with the custom of that day, was reclining on a couch near the table, resting on His left elbow and eating with His right hand. Mary broke the delicate flask and emptied its precious contents upon Jesus. The flask held a full Roman pound, which is twelve ounces, an abundance of perfumed ointment, and she used it all. Matthew and Mark tell us that she anointed Jesus' head. John says that she anointed Jesus' feet, and when she saw the excess ointment on His feet, having no towel, she wiped His feet with her hair. She anointed Jesus so liberally that in Matthew's account, Jesus described her act as "pouring this fragrant oil on My body." The strong aroma filled the room.

This fragrant oil was pure nard, a most costly ointment made from an aromatic herb grown in the high pasture land of the

Himalaya Mountains between Tibet and India. Because this herb could be obtained only through long caravans traveling through high mountain passes, it was most costly. Judas estimated its cost at 300 denarii. In one of His parables, Jesus identified a denarius as reasonable pay for an full day of labor in a vineyard. When you consider that the Jews did not work on the 52 Sabbaths of each year, 300 denarii would be the total wages for almost a full year's work.

The ordinary custom of that day was to honor a guest by providing him with a basin of water and a towel that he might wash the dust of travel off his feet (Luke 7:44) and by anointing his head with olive oil. Instead of using water and olive oil, Mary used this most expensive of fragrant ointments. She used pure nard, not some generic substitute or cheap imitation but the genuine article in an undiluted form. Instead of using a towel, Mary used her hair to wipe His feet. She acted out of gratitude, out of devotion, out of heart-felt love. She had taken what was probably her most costly possession, and she had lavished it on Jesus in a fleeting moment of service.

We have looked at Mary's act. Next we need to examine Judas' criticism. As soon as Judas realized what had happened, he voiced a sharp criticism of Mary's actions. He cried out in effect, What a waste! According to the accounts in Matthew and Mark, the other disciples also joined in this criticism.

The Apostle Paul warns us that Satan can transform himself into an angel of light, and that Satan's ministers can transform

themselves into ministers of righteousness. And so Judas couched his criticism of Mary in a sanctimonious concern for the poor.

I have three comments on Judas' criticism of Mary. First, notice that Judas criticized Mary's concrete act of devotion with a mere expression of concern for people in the abstract. Judas didn't do anything for anybody; he just made a lofty sounding statement of concern. Judas didn't refer to any specific person with any specific need. He just spoke in the abstract about the poor.

There was a Peanuts cartoon where Linus announces to his sister Lucy that he is going to be a doctor. Lucy responds, "You, a doctor? You don't love mankind." Linus replies, "I do too love mankind. It's people I can't stand."

It is so easy to express concern for humanity in the abstract. I cannot help but think of men such as Lenin and Stalin who continually expressed devotion to "the people" in the abstract but who also routinely persecuted and even killed multitudes of specific, concrete individuals.

True love is not manifested by abstract statements of concern but by concrete acts for specific individuals.

Second, notice that Judas made a contrast between concern for the poor and devotion to Jesus. Beloved, this is a false dichotomy, a false dilemma. Down through the ages, those who are devoted to Jesus have done far more for the poor than has

any other group of people. And when Christians leave their first love by losing their love and devotion to Jesus, they also lose their zeal for serving others. That is the paradox of the so-called social gospel, which involves an elevation of acts of service as more important than Jesus and His Gospel message. Those who persevere in good works are those who continue to put devotion to Jesus as their highest priority.

Let's put it this way. Jesus said, "I am vine. You are the branches. Abide in Me, and you will bear much fruit. But apart from Me, you can do nothing." Those who make their first priority in life the bearing of fruit aren't going to bear fruit. Those who make their first priority in life abiding in Christ are going to bear fruit.

Third, notice that Judas failed to see that we should do everything as an act of devotion for Jesus. Colossians 3:23 says:

23 And whatever you do, it heartily, as to the Lord and not to men,

1 Corinthians 10:31 says,

31 ... whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.

Everything we do, including works of service to those in need, should be done ultimately for Jesus and out of our devotion to Jesus. Only those things done for Jesus are going to last. Everything related only to this earth, where moth and rust

destroy and thieves break in and steal, ... Everything related only to this earth is going to pass away. Every action we take should be devoted to Jesus, or else it will have no lasting significance.

And there are some actions which should be devoted not only ultimately to Jesus but solely to Jesus. Actions such as coming to worship on Sunday and partaking of the Lord's Supper. And instead of viewing these acts as useless, which was Judas' point of view, we should view them as the most valuable of all.

You see, you need a foundation of meaning upon which to build your life, something that is meaningful in and of itself and something that is eternal. This world is not meaningful in and of itself. It is but a means to an end, the end of bringing glory to God. And the form of this world is passing away and thus has no lasting meaning. But Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever. For life to have lasting meaning, we must devote our life to Him.

Judas expressed his sanctimonious concern for the poor, but, of course, Judas' criticism was hypocritical. He voiced concern for the poor, but his real concern was selfish. He was the disciple who kept the money box, and he was a thief. His real concern was not for the poor but for himself.

We have seen Mary's act of devotion and Judas' criticism of that act. Our last point is Jesus' defense of Mary's act. Jesus cuts short the criticism and defends what Mary has done. Judas and

those who followed his lead failed to see the real worth of Jesus. They undervalued Jesus.

Jesus is so worthy that the kindest thing Jesus can do for us is to allow us to lavish costly and sacrificial devotion upon Him, to pour out our life before Him as a drink offering.

Mary alone had some understanding of that point.

Mary also had a better understanding of coming events than the others. This Mary who anointed Jesus' feet is also the one known for sitting at Jesus' feet and listening to Him.

For some time now, Jesus had been saying that He was going to Jerusalem to die. Mary listened to Him and took Him seriously. Jesus said that Mary gave Him His costly anointing as an early preparation for His burial, which was less than a week away.

Both Mary and Judas were fulfilling prophecy. The prophet Zechariah prophesied that as a part of His humiliation, the divine Shepherd of Israel would be valued at only 30 pieces of silver. That, of course, is the price Judas accepted as payment for betraying Jesus. This Judas who cried out that Jesus was not worth the pound of nard also regarded thirty pieces of silver as more valuable than his loyalty to the Savior.

We see the contrast here between the low value Judas put on Jesus, and the high value Mary put on Him. Mary viewed an opportunity to give Jesus even a fleeting tribute as more

valuable than 300 denarii, the estimated value of the ointment she lavished on Jesus that evening.

Judas' low evaluation of Jesus was a part of Jesus' prophesied humiliation. And Mary's gift that night was the beginning of Jesus' prophesied exaltation.

Let me read from Isaiah 53:

- 7 He was oppressed and He was afflicted, yet He opened not His mouth; he was led as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so He opened not His mouth.
- 8 He was taken from prison and from judgment, and who will declare His generation? For He was cut off from the land of the living; for the transgressions of My people He was stricken.
- 9 **And they made His grave with the wicked-- but with the rich at His death,** because He had done no violence, nor was any deceit in His mouth.
- 10 Yet it pleased the LORD to bruise Him; he has put Him to grief. When You make His soul an offering for sin, **he shall see His seed, He shall prolong His days, and the pleasure of the LORD shall prosper in His hand.**
- 11 **He shall see the labor of His soul, and be satisfied. By His knowledge My righteous Servant shall justify many, for He shall bear their iniquities.**
- 12 **Therefore I will divide Him a portion with the great, and He shall divide the spoil with the strong, because**

He poured out His soul unto death, and He was numbered with the transgressors, and He bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.

In this prophecy, we read first about the prophesied humiliation and then about the prophesied exaltation of the Savior. After the shameful and painful death of the cross, the beginning of the exaltation of Jesus is His being given an honorable burial. Joseph of Arimethea and Nicodemus wrap Jesus' body in about a hundred pounds of myrrh and aloes, and they put the body in Joseph's newly carved and unused tomb. Jesus is given the burial of a rich man, and the beginning of that honorable burial is when Mary anoints His body with a pound of costly nard.

Philippians 2 says,

- 9 Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name,
- 10 that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth,
- 11 and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Mary was privileged to be used by God in the exaltation of Jesus by her act which anticipated His death. God can use us similarly today as we partake of the Lord's Supper and remember His death.