

John 12:1–8

Introduction

Last week we saw the chief priests and Pharisees convening a council and determining at this council that Jesus must be put to death (“It is expedient for you,” Caiaphas said, “that one man die for the people, and that the whole nation not perish”). Last week we heard a wicked man, in the very act of *expressing* his wickedness and at this very council that will choose the death sentence for Jesus, prophesying the saving, redeeming work of God in Jesus Christ – not only for the Jews but for all the nations. We heard the *high priest*, in his wickedness and at this very council that will choose the death sentence for Jesus, prophesying the “once for all” sacrifice of this same Jesus, so that because of *His* death, *we* might not perish but live. We saw in this, in a way that staggers not just our minds but also our hearts, the awesome, all-encompassing sovereignty of God – who works even evil and wickedness to the end of His saving purposes.

When the council’s decision was known to Jesus, “[He] no longer continued to walk publicly among the Jews, but went away from there to the country near the wilderness, into a city called Ephraim; and there He stayed with the disciples.” Jesus won’t be the helpless victim of a murderous counsel. Jesus will go up to Jerusalem in His own time and His own way and lay down His own life for us as our Passover sacrifice. So we left off last week with these words:

- John 11:55–57 — Now the Passover of the Jews was near, and many went up to Jerusalem out of the country before the Passover to purify themselves. So they were seeking for Jesus, and were saying to one another as they stood in the temple, “What do you think; that He will not come to the feast at all?” Now the chief priests and the Pharisees had given orders that if anyone knew where He was, he was to report it, so that they might seize Him.

And now we pick up, this week, in chapter twelve:

I. John 12:1 — Jesus, *therefore*, six days before *the Passover*, came to Bethany where Lazarus was, whom Jesus had raised from the dead.

Can you *hear* all that’s going on in this verse? “Jesus, *therefore* came to Bethany [a village two miles east of Jerusalem]... In other words, Jesus came to Bethany *because* it was nearing the time when He must be “seized” by the chief priests and Pharisees and put to death (11:53, 57; cf. 18:3, 12; Mk. 14:44–46). Jesus came to Bethany *because* it was nearing the time when He would “die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but also to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad” (11:51–52).

“Jesus, therefore, *six days before the Passover*, came to Bethany...” Do you hear the significance of those words? Jesus has gone up to Jerusalem for many feasts, but now He comes to Bethany (on His way to Jerusalem) because it was nearing the time when He would offer *Himself* as our Passover sacrifice.

“Jesus, therefore, six days before the Passover, came to Bethany *where Lazarus was, whom Jesus had raised from the dead.*” Can you hear, yet again, the redemptive weight of these words? Jesus came to Bethany because it was nearing that time when the raising of Lazarus was to truly come into its own as a saving revelation of Jesus’ glory. Jesus came to Bethany “where Lazarus was, whom Jesus had raised from the dead,” so that He might be *glorified*.

So now let’s let the full weight of these words sink into our minds and into our hearts (we’ll come back to them again at the end): “Jesus, *therefore*, six days before *the Passover*, came to Bethany *where Lazarus was, whom Jesus had raised from the dead.*”

II. John 12:2 — So they made Him a supper there, and Martha was serving; but Lazarus was one of those reclining at the table with Him.

John doesn’t say who “they” are who made this supper in Jesus’ honor, but Matthew and Mark tell us it was hosted “in the house of Simon the leper (Mat. 26:6; Mk. 14:3).” * Apparently, this supper was a whole village affair and so it was only natural that Martha and Lazarus should also be there. We can see the picture vividly as it’s described with the detailed touches of one who was there: Martha was serving; Lazarus was one of those reclining at the table with Jesus. The “table” was spread on the floor and the guests would also have been sitting not on chairs, but on the floor with their feet behind them, stretched away from the “table.” But now, as we look around the room and we see Jesus, and Lazarus (along with the rest) reclining at the table and we see Martha (along with others) serving we wonder where Mary is. Martha won’t be mentioned again in this story or in the rest of John’s Gospel. Lazarus will only be mentioned again after this story is all over and even then, only in a peripheral sort of way (cf. 12:9-10, 17). The fact that Lazarus and Martha are present at this supper is, for John, mostly irrelevant; but if Martha is serving, and if Lazarus is one of those reclining at the table with Jesus, then it’s only natural for us to be wondering: What is Mary doing? We don’t have to wait to find out. The vivid recollections of an eyewitness continue as we read in verse three:

III. John 12:3 — Mary then 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.

One commentator tells us that nard is a “[scented] oil extracted from the root and spike... of the nard plant, [which is] grown in **India**” (Carson). Another commentator translates John’s measurement of weight (a Roman pound; about 11½ oz.) into a measurement of volume and estimates “about a **pint**” (Morris). In light of the *origin* of the nard, in light of the huge *quantity* of the nard, and in light of the fact that this nard, John tells us, was of the *purest quality* (cf. Carson), we can already begin to imagine how expensive and how valuable this perfumed oil must have been. John says it was “very costly” (cf. Mat. 13:46; 1 Pet. 1:7). In verse five we’ll learn that it could have been sold for three hundred denarii, which is how much a common laborer in that day would have earned in an entire year (perhaps fifteen to twenty thousand dollars in today’s money). The costliness of this single bottle of perfumed oil is almost mind-boggling – at least to any “common,” “ordinary” person. When and how did Mary come by this

* Mark recounts the story out of chronological order and with a slightly different emphasis for purposes of his own (cf. Carson and Morris).

perfume? How was it hers to use in whatever way she wished? We don't know the answers to those questions, but we can know that a pint of pure nard would have been precious and of no small worth even to the wealthiest and richest.

So now can we be just as astonished and just as amazed as everyone else? Mary took the *entire pint* of scented oil and anointed the feet of Jesus. Mark tells us that the container for the nard was an alabaster flask and that Mary “broke [the neck of] the flask and poured it over Jesus’ head” (Mk. 14:3; cf. Mat. 26:6-7). The fact is that there was more than enough oil in the flask to anoint *both* the head *and* the feet of Jesus. Jesus Himself will say that Mary poured the perfume on His “body” (Mat. 26:12; Mk. 14:8), which makes more sense when we think of her anointing both His head and His feet. Matthew and Mark emphasize Mary’s pouring the oil on Jesus’ head probably as a picture of a royal anointing. John emphasizes Mary’s pouring the oil on Jesus’ feet in order to further bring out her total self-abasement (cf. 13:1-15) and her total devotion to Jesus.

So, in John’s portrayal, Mary has just emptied the entire pint of pure nard on the feet of Jesus. Does she realize that once she’s poured it out it becomes mixed with other impurities and there’s no way of collecting it again? And yet the amount of oil that Mary has poured out means that there’s an excess of oil that still needs to be cleaned up. And so now we see Mary letting down her hair—which in that culture was usually the mark of a woman with “loose morals” (Morris)—and wiping up the excess oil with her hair.

I don’t like the word “reckless” for describing God’s love for us *or* our love for God. Regardless of our intentions, words have meanings and connotations and the meaning and connotation of “reckless” is *negative*—“irresponsible, ill-advised, unwise.” God is never, ever reckless in His love or in any other of his attributes. And as for us, maybe we can “own” the word reckless as it is unjustly given to us by the world, but any true and pure love directed toward any good and beautiful object can never, under any circumstances be called reckless.

So what about saying that God’s love for us was “heedless”? Well, heedless of what? Heedless of the great cost to Him in the giving of His Son? Certainly not! Heedless of any concern for His own name, and reputation, and honor? To the contrary! Heedful only of *us* and of His great love for *us*? May it never be! We can say with awe and wonder that God’s love for us is extravagant, immeasurable, and incomprehensible, but we should also be clear that God is no more “heedless” in His love for us than He is “reckless.” This is good news!

So what, then, about us? What about Mary? Could we say that her expression of love and devotion was “heedlessly extravagant”? I believe we can, and we should! Heedless can be qualified (heedless of *what*?) while reckless, in addition to being negative, can never be qualified (other than emphasizing *how* reckless). Mary was heedless of the precious worth and value of the nard and of any of the “practical” ramifications of pouring it out on the feet of Jesus *in comparison* with the precious worth and value of *this Jesus* whom she had come to know as the Son of God who had come into the world—and whom she had come to know as her *own Lord*. In pouring out the oil and in letting her hair down to wipe it up, Mary was heedless of what anyone else in the room might think *in comparison* with her desire that *Jesus* should know her love and devotion to *Him* as her Lord. She’s heedless of what anyone else in the room might

think because she cares only—and above all other things—for the love of her Lord – of this Jesus who is reclining at the table.

Mary’s act of love and devotion is an act of such “heedless” extravagance, and of such purity and sincerity, that Jesus can say to His disciples (as Matthew and Mark tell us): “Truly I say to you, wherever this gospel is preached in the whole world, what this woman has done will also be spoken of in memory of her” (Mat. 26:13; Mk. 14:9). And today we see the fulfillment of Jesus’ word not only in the preservation of this account in the Scriptures (in Matthew and Mark and John)—the Scriptures from which the Gospel is being preached throughout the whole world—but even in the preaching of this very passage this morning. John doesn’t record these particular words of Jesus, but he does say this: “and the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.” We can almost feel as if we’re there. On the one hand, these are the memories of one who *was* there in the house and who himself saw and witnessed these things – who remembers even the smell and the fragrance of the perfume in the room. And yet we know that John isn’t just interested in painting a vivid picture or sharing his own recollections. *Why* does John tell us specifically that “the *house* was *filled* with the fragrance of the perfume”? Especially in the light of what we know from Matthew and Mark that Jesus said on this occasion, John’s point must not be just the fragrance of the perfume filling the house. He sees *in this* a beautiful representation of the true fragrance of this act of devotion permeating to all the world and calling all of us to know this same heedlessly extravagant love. This is surely what John means to communicate to us when he says that “the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.”

We do need to be “careful,” here. No, it’s not *always appropriate* to let your hair down if you’re a woman in first century Judea (in fact, it’s usually not). That would be reckless. It’s not *always “necessary”* to pour out a pound of pure nard on someone’s feet as an expression of love and devotion – not even as an expression of love and devotion to Jesus. But what *is* always right is that the heart from which this heedlessly extravagant act of devotion flowed should always be ours. What is always appropriate and beautiful is that we should be ultimately *heedful* only of the unspeakably precious worth and value of Jesus who is to us our Savior and our Lord. What is always appropriate and beautiful is that we should be ultimately *heedful* only of His favor toward us and of His love for us. There can be no talk, here, of somehow being “let off the hook.” In the first place, such a heart as this must always be *expressing* itself in all of life. And in the second place, how can we even think or speak of a “hook” to be let off of? How can we speak of that when once we’ve come to know the joy of true love and devotion to Jesus?

Is the heart of Mary, from which flowed such a heedlessly extravagant act of love and devotion, also ours? Is the heart of Mary, which was *heedful* only of the unspeakably precious worth and value of Jesus and only of His love and favor toward her, also ours? It’s against the backdrop of this fragrant example of love and devotion that we can see what John describes next in all its ugliness.

IV. John 12:4–6 — But Judas Iscariot, one of His disciples, who was intending to hand Him over, said, “Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii 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 money box, he used to pilfer what was put into it.

If Mary was heedlessly extravagant in the expression of her love, Judas was reckless in his selfishness and greed. If Mary anoints the feet of Jesus and wipes His feet with her hair, Judas intends to hand this same Jesus over to His enemies. And so it's from this heart filled with selfishness and greed and disillusioned resentment that Judas says what he says: "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and given to poor people?"

We say that we can see this in all its repulsive ugliness, but is there any sense at all in which we might be able to identify with Judas – even if we don't want to admit it? We may not in any way be a Judas who would ever "hand Jesus over," but we may still be like the rest of the disciples who Matthew tells us were in whole-hearted agreement with the apparently "righteous reasoning" of Judas (Mat. 26:8). In a single moment Mary has just poured out twenty thousand dollars' worth of oil and then wiped up the excess with her hair. Was this really the best way to honor God? Can you imagine how many poor people could have been fed and clothed if instead of being poured out on Jesus, this oil had been sold and the proceeds given to the apostolic band for distribution to the poor especially among God's covenant people? Can you imagine not only the benefit to the poor, but how well this would have reflected on the heart and on the ministry of Jesus? Of course, Judas cares nothing for the poor. He says this only because "he was a thief, and as he had the money box, he used to pilfer what was put into it." This is the same Judas who will hand Jesus over to His enemies for thirty pieces of silver (Mat. 26:15). But is there no legitimacy at all to any of Judas' logic? We have only to let Jesus answer this question.

V. John 12:7-8 — Therefore Jesus said, "Let her alone, so that she may keep it for the day of My burial. For you always have the poor with you, but you do not always have Me."

What is Jesus saying here? He's saying two things. Mary has seen *in Jesus* (and also, perhaps, in herself) something that Judas and even the rest of the disciples have not yet seen. One commentator says, "If self-righteous piety sometimes snuffs out genuine compassion [for others], it [is also true] that social activism, even that which meets real needs, [often] masks a [self-righteous] spirit that knows nothing of [true] worship and adoration" (Carson). Seeing—in Jesus—her Lord and her Messiah present with her in the flesh, Mary is unaware of anything that could possibly make what she does in any way inappropriate or unwise. In fact, Mary's act of devotion is justified by the Scriptures themselves – by the words of the psalmist directed toward the Davidic king and Messiah:

- Psalm 45:6-8 — Your throne, O God, is forever and ever. The scepter of your kingdom is a scepter of uprightness; you have loved righteousness and hated wickedness. **Therefore God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness beyond your companions; your robes are all fragrant with myrrh and aloes and cassia.**

If God Himself anoints the Messiah with the oil of gladness so that His robes are all fragrant with myrrh and aloes and cassia, then how can Mary be condemned for acting accordingly and even being an instrument God uses to fulfill His word through the psalmist? Neither is Mary's act of devotion unprecedented. We read in Matthew chapter two:

- Matthew 2:11 — And going into the house, [the magi] saw the child [Jesus] with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh.

It was God himself who saw to it that His only Son was welcomed into this world with gifts befitting His “choice and precious” worth (cf. 1 Pet. 2:4). And it will be God Himself who also sees that His only Son receives a burial befitting this same choice and precious worth. We read in John chapter nineteen:

- John 19:38–40 — After these things Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly for fear of the Jews, asked Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus, and Pilate gave him permission. So he came and took away his body. Nicodemus also, who earlier had come to Jesus by night, came bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds in weight. So they took the body of Jesus and bound it in linen cloths with the spices, as is the burial custom of the Jews.

Mary doesn’t need to carefully weigh in the balances the two alternatives of pouring out the oil on Jesus or selling the oil and giving the proceeds to the poor. She’s not rejecting the one for the other; all she knows—in this moment—is one thing – and that one thing is the only thing that’s needful for her to know. Her Lord and her Messiah—the Lord’s own anointed—the object of her deepest love and devotion, is there, present with her in the flesh. And so without any need for second thoughts or for weighing any other options, Mary does what she does—and the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume; and so even today the whole world is filled with the fragrance of this “simple” act of love and devotion.

It’s in this light that we can hear Jesus’ words rightly – not as a callous dismissal of the poor but as a rebuke to Judas (and the rest of the disciples) for failing to *see* as Mary has *seen*: “You always have the poor with you, *but you do not always have ME*. In the end, it’s not to Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus, that we look, but rather to the Jesus that she so loved. The fragrance of Mary’s act is not a fragrance that draws us to her, but a fragrance that draws us to Jesus as the Gospel of His saving love is preached to us. *May all*, then, that we do be always nothing “more” and nothing less than an expression of our “heedlessly extravagant” love and devotion to Jesus – a love that is *heedful* only of the unspeakably precious worth and value of Jesus and only of His love and favor toward us.

But there’s more, isn’t there? “Jesus said, ‘Let her alone, **so that she may keep it for the day of My burial**. For you always have the poor with you, but you do not always have Me.’”

Remember, now, the opening verse of this chapter: “Jesus, *therefore* [because it was nearing the time when He must be ‘seized’ by the chief priests and Pharisees and put to death], six days before the *Passover* [when He would offer Himself up as our Passover sacrifice], came to Bethany *where Lazarus was, whom Jesus had raised from the dead* [so that through this He might be glorified].” For Jesus, the “hour” for which He has come into the world is now filling all His horizon and all His vision. And so what Jesus sees in Mary’s heedlessly extravagant act of love and devotion is something more than even Mary knows (similar to how last week Caiaphas spoke better than he knew). What Jesus sees in Mary’s act of love and devotion is an anointing of His body for burial. But notice how Jesus words what He says: “Let her alone, **so**

that she may **keep it for** the day of My burial.” Why do they need to let “her alone *so that*” she can do this? Hasn’t she *already* done it? And how can Jesus speak of Mary “keeping it” for the day of His burial? Hasn’t she *already* poured it out? The explanation for this strange way of speaking is really very simple: Jesus sees in Mary’s act of love and devotion the unfolding of His Father’s own sovereign purpose in *providing ahead of time* for His burial (cf. Mat. 26:12; Mk. 14:8; Lk. 23:55-24:1). In other words, “Let her alone, in order that in this act of love and devotion, the sovereign purposes of God might be accomplished. Let her alone, in order that in her act of love and devotion there might be a revelation—and a manifestation even to Me—of *the Father’s* own love for Me” (cf. 10:17; 15:9; 16:32). “Let her alone, **so that** she may **keep it for** the day of My burial. For you always have the poor with you, but you do not always have *Me*.”

Conclusion

Our love for Jesus is the love of a servant for his Lord, of a sinner for his Savior; *God’s* love for Jesus is very different: it’s the love of the Father for His one and only Son. And yet it’s precisely in our love for Jesus as our Savior and our Lord—who first loved us—that we’re always “*honoring*” the Father’s love for His one and only incarnate Son. Therefore: If it’s *the Father’s* own love for Jesus that should be reflected in *our* love for Jesus, how can there possibly be any limit to how “heedlessly extravagant” this love should be?

Jesus said, “For you always have the poor with you, but you do not always have *Me*.” One day we will have Him always with us, even in the flesh. Until that day, may the fragrance of Mary’s example be always drawing us to Him.