

**Find Life in the Son:
Devotion True and False
John 12:1-11**

Introduction

Our passage this morning is fitting for the first Lord's Day in the new year. Why do we gather to worship as we do? What does it mean? Why does it matter? To be human is to worship something, however worthy or unworthy of our devotion it may be.

¹ Six days before the Passover, Jesus therefore came to Bethany, where Lazarus was, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. ² So they gave a dinner for him there. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those reclining with him at table. ³ Mary therefore took a pound of expensive ointment made from pure nard, and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped his feet with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. ⁴ But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (he who was about to betray him), said, ⁵ "Why was this ointment not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?" ⁶ 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. ⁷ Jesus said, "Leave her alone, so that she may keep it for the day of my burial. ⁸ For the poor you

always have with you, but you do not always have me.”

⁹ When the large crowd of the Jews learned that Jesus was there, they came, not only on account of him but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. ¹⁰ So the chief priests made plans to put Lazarus to death as well, ¹¹ because on account of him many of the Jews were going away and believing in Jesus.

Mary, Judas, and the chief priests—all three outwardly show worship concerns: Mary, one of the two sisters of Lazarus, whom Jesus recently raised from dead, known for sitting at Jesus’ feet to hear Him teach; Judas, one of the twelve; and the chief priests, the guardians of temple worship God had instituted. Only Mary, however, receives the approval of Jesus. Her devotion was real and showed insight into the sacrificial mission of Jesus as the Messiah.

1. Self-Sacrificing Love (1-3)
2. Self-Serving Hypocrisy (4-8)
3. Self-Protective Hostility (9-11)

1. Self-Sacrificing Love (1-3)

¹ Six days before the Passover, Jesus therefore came to Bethany, where Lazarus was, whom Jesus had raised from the dead.

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John's time reference informs us that Jesus is now entering the last week before His crucifixion, burial, and resurrection—what we commonly call the passion week, from the Greek word *pascho*, to suffer. John will devote chapters 12-19 to this one week and chapters 20-21 to the post-resurrection ministry of Jesus, because these events are absolutely critical to understanding who Jesus is and what He accomplished.

All of Jesus' life on earth is important, but the Gospel writers don't record everything. They focus our attention primarily on Jesus' identity and saving mission.

John 20:30-31

³⁰ Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; ³¹ but these are 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.

The bulk of what all four Gospels record bears testimony to the three and a half years of

Jesus' public ministry. Matthew and Luke record the events related to His birth, but even these are to establish His identity as the promised Messiah, the Savior-King. John starts with His pre-existence to underscore that Jesus is the eternal Son of God who came in human flesh. He records events in the ministry of Jesus, not just His teaching and miracles, but His ongoing conflict with the religious leaders who held sway in His day. But John spends the most time focused on this last week leading to the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Clearly, John would not have us walk away from his Gospel with the idea that Jesus was just a great teacher and miracle-worker. He is determined that we see Him as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, slain for our sins, and risen again.

Any version of so-called Christianity that does not focus on Jesus in terms of His self-sacrificing saving mission misses the point of why He came to earth at all.

All the important things that Christians believe and do cannot be divorced from this great theme of redemption. Without it, Christianity devolves into mere do-goodism, philosophy, and ethical codes. It has no power to save.

You remember that Bethany is only two miles outside of Jerusalem, where the chief enemies of Jesus who want to put Him to death have put out a warrant for His arrest.

Lazarus is at the meal in honor of Jesus. If this is the same meal as Matthew 26 and Mark 14 describe, then they are eating in the home of Simon the leper, evidently healed by Jesus. Matthew and Mark do not name Mary, but John does, and they record that she broke an alabaster vase or box of expensive spikenard ointment and anointed His head. John records that she anointed His feet. A pound of ointment could certainly cover both. It was a lavish gift poured out on Jesus. To wipe His feet with her hair was an extravagant, even shocking expression of love that broke the bounds of normal respectability. The aroma filled the room, and Jesus declares in Mark that Mary's act will be remembered wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world. Mary did this in the company of the most devoted followers of Jesus, but they were taken back by her extravagant expression of self-sacrificing devotion.

Jesus connected her action to His coming burial, less than one week away. How much she understood about what Jesus was about to undergo is not completely clear, but her self-sacrificing expression of love mirrored His

self-sacrifice that would demonstrate God's love for sinners in need of redemption.

Jesus talked a lot about His coming crucifixion during the last six months of His earthly ministry. His disciples recoiled at what He kept telling them. But He responded early on that they were thinking the way man thinks, not in line with God. They did not yet fully understand what God's saving mission required, and what followers of Jesus were called to do.

Matthew 16:24-25

24 If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. **25** For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.

Without the cross there would be no ransom from sin. Without the self-sacrifice of God the Son there could be no salvation of sinners. And those who understand what Jesus came to do and trust the power of His work enough to follow Him display a willingness to sacrifice themselves as well. It is what true love gladly does.

True devotion to God honors God the Son in His self-sacrificial mission. True love for Him counts Him worth any and every sacrifice. Mary's gift of love was costly. It was extravagant. It was beyond the bounds. It

made other disciples uneasy and even angry. It seemed to them to be going too far. But they were wrong, and she was right. Jesus deserves such devotion.

He accepted and commended her extravagant expression of love. He connected it to His own extravagant expression of love. And He rebuked those who found fault with her costly, self-sacrificing act of devotion.

Applications

- What are you willing to sacrifice out of love for Jesus and what are you unwilling to sacrifice?
- What self-sacrificial devotion of others makes you uncomfortable or judgmental?
- How does your worship of Jesus reflect the self-sacrificial nature of His gospel?

2. Self-Serving Hypocrisy (4-8)

⁴ But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (he who was about to betray him), said, ⁵ "Why was this ointment not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?" ⁶ 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. ⁷ Jesus said, "Leave her alone, so that she may keep it for the day of my burial. ⁸ For the poor you always have with you, but you do not always have me."

When we read the accounts of this event in Matthew in Mark, we find out that Judas was not the only one who leveled this charge against Mary. It's possible he was the instigator or the most vocal.

It is good and right to give to the poor. It's not uncommon for those who preach most about taking care of the poor to be the most stingy in giving of their own resources to do so. They prefer spending other people's money.

Whoever gives to the poor lends to the Lord. It is a tangible expression of recognizing every human being as made in the image of God. True religion cares for the vulnerable (James 1:27) and devotes itself to urgent needs of people around them (Titus 3:8, 14). Born-again believers who were once thieves are no longer to steal from others, but to labor with their hands so they have something to give to others (Ephesians 4:28). God transforms takers into givers who reflect His own generous character.

So it is an ongoing concern of truly godly people to give to the poor. Jesus affirms that this will always be so because in this world there will always be those who are poor for a variety of reasons. Needs are everywhere. But devotion to Jesus has to go beyond

charitable giving. There are many philanthropists in the world who don't give Jesus devotion at all. They don't understand who He is or what He came to do. They consider it an extravagant waste to give toward His honor. To spend resources on making Him known as the promised Savior seems impractical to them. They are earthbound and timebound in their thinking.

Anyone who loves God cannot turn a blind eye to a brother or sister lacking in basic life necessities (1 John). But we must do more than minister to just physical needs. The body will eventually die. What then? Human beings need a Savior who can rescue them from the grave. Our concerns cannot be merely earthbound. Am I reconciled to my Creator who made me in His image to glorify Him and enjoy Him forever? Have I been made right with God through Christ so that I am no longer condemned to the lake of fire that burns forever? Life is more than just food and clothing. Lost people pursue these things as the greatest concerns. We must seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness. The Lord will see to it that all our physical needs are supplied (Matthew 6:33).

Judas was tone deaf to these gospel truths. He saw Jesus as his ticket to wealth and power in the Messianic kingdom that would rule in earth. Judas wanted nothing to do with

sacrifice. He cared nothing for being right with God. He had closely observed Jesus in His public ministry, but his calculations had no category for justification from sin, reconciliation with God, and eternal life. He had preached in Jesus' name. He had done miracles alongside the others. But when he observed Mary pour out extravagant devotion toward Jesus, it was disturbing to him.

John explains the core problem Judas suffered. It was a heart problem. His heart had turned away from Jesus. Judas would be the one who to betray Him. When you've turned against someone, it irritates you to see others fawn over him. And Judas' heart love for earthly wealth had already made him a thief. He wanted the 300 days wages that Mary's precious ointment was worth in the bag he was entrusted to oversee because he stole from it for himself from time to time. Judas didn't care about the poor. He cared about himself. His criticism was a cover—criticism of others is often cover for a divided heart and hidden sin. *Judas followed Jesus for the same reason he kept the treasurer's bag—for what he could get out of it.*

Many follow the pattern of Judas. They keep company with Christians because doing so gives them some kind of advantage in the categories of life they actually value. They are not spiritually-minded people. They're all

about budgets, buildings, and popularity. They follow Jesus for health, wealth, respectability, power. If Jesus ever doesn't come through for them—if they are called to suffer for His sake—they feel betrayed by Him and will betray Him themselves.

If you are a true follower of Jesus, guard your heart. Do not let idols grow there. They will drain away your life and turn you against true devotion to Jesus.

Applications

- What advantage are you actually seeking in following Jesus?
- What kind of loss could make you consider forsaking Jesus?
- What kinds of hypocrisy have you allowed to grow in your life, if any?
- If you find yourself critical of those who show devotion to Christ, what kind of heart issues might you be trying to hide?

3. Self-Protective Hostility (9-11)

⁹ When the large crowd of the Jews learned that Jesus was there, they came, not only on account of him but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. ¹⁰ So the chief priests made plans to put Lazarus to death as well, ¹¹ because on account of him many of the Jews were going away and believing in Jesus.

It's possible that many in this crowd were chasers of whatever is sensational. Lazarus for a time was somewhat a celebrity, and a celebrity draws a crowd. But among them were those who understood that the resurrection of Lazarus was a message from God regarding who Jesus is. They believed in Him as the promised Messiah and Savior of the world.

The chief priests didn't care how sincere the faith of the crowd was. They just did not like more people following Jesus. His popularity threatened their own power. It could catch the attention of the Roman authorities and bring trouble on the whole nation. And if any of these followers actually did believe what Jesus was teaching, they would cease having high regard for these religious hucksters who had made a lucrative business from temple worship.

Even what begins as legitimate—and certainly the temple worship was a good thing. God had prescribed it.—*even what begins as something good can be hijacked into nothing more than a religious business to gain and preserve wealth, power, and prestige.* These high priests were experts at turning religion into profit and power. Real devotion to God threatens such business enterprises, even if they're called Christian. They want Jesus dead

because Jesus brought true religion that exposed their fraud. And now Lazarus must die as well. He is giving greater credibility to Jesus.

These men refused to deal with what the resurrection of Lazarus actually meant. Instead of investigating further, instead of rethinking their opposition to Jesus, all they can think of is how to neutralize the threat. They care nothing whatsoever about whether God was at work. They refuse even to consider that maybe they need to repent and believe in Jesus themselves.

What Judas did on a small scale, these men had made into big business. I think we naturally recoil from such religious fraud—but mainly when we see it in other groups and other people. But what these men are doing is a very human thing. It is natural to the unregenerate heart—and to the heart of even a believer who is backslidden.

This sort of thing starts at a heart level, just as did the defection of Judas. It is something every family, every church, every Christian institution must guard against. *It is so very easy for our devotion to Jesus to become all about us, our church, our school, our institution. Because we are part of an effort dedicated to Jesus we just assume we are doing the Lord's work. But over time, our*

decisions can become more about our own survival and prosperity than about loyalty to Jesus. If God shows Himself active in some other person or church or group or institution, we consider it a competitive threat, not a reason to praise God and rejoice with them because of His blessing.

And when we are confronted for our own sinful behavior, rather than repenting, we double down and try to silence whoever had the courage and concern to approach us. These are signs of the same self-protective hostility that characterized these chief priests.

Applications

- If you find yourself hostile to other Christians, churches, and institutions, what reasons in your own heart and life could be the cause?
- When you're really honest with yourself, what may matter more to you than actually worshiping Jesus from your heart?
- What evidence do you see in your life that you may be resisting His call for you to repent from sin and to trust Him more deeply?

Conclusion

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- How does your worship of Jesus reflect the self-sacrificial nature of His gospel?
- What advantage are you actually seeking in following Jesus?
- What kind of loss could make you consider forsaking Jesus?
- What kinds of hypocrisy have you allowed to grow in your life, if any?
- If you find yourself critical of those who show devotion to Christ, what kind of heart issues might you be trying to hide?
- If you find yourself hostile to other Christians, churches, and institutions, what reasons in your own heart and life could be the cause?
- When you're really honest with yourself, what may matter more to you than actually worshiping Jesus from your heart?
- What evidence do you see in your life that you may be resisting His call for you to repent from sin and to trust Him more deeply?