

Mary Anoints Jesus at Bethany

John 12:1-11

Then, six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, where Lazarus was who had been dead, whom He had raised from the dead. 2 There they made Him a supper; and Martha served, but Lazarus was one of those who sat at the table with Him. 3 Then Mary took a pound of very costly oil of spikenard, anointed the feet of Jesus, and wiped His feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the oil.

4 But one of His disciples, Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, who would betray Him, said, 5 "Why was this fragrant oil not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?" 6 This he said, not that he cared for the poor, but because he was a thief, and had the money box; and he used to take what was put in it.

7 But Jesus said, "Let her alone; she has kept this for the day of My burial. 8 For the poor you have with you always, but Me you do not have always."

9 Now a great many of the Jews knew that He was there; and they came, not for Jesus' sake only, but that they might also see Lazarus, whom He had raised from the dead. 10 But the chief priests plotted to put Lazarus to death also, 11 because on account of him many of the Jews went away and believed in Jesus.

Chapter 12 closes out John's record of Christ's public discourses.

John Chapter 13 forward records what Jesus said to His disciples in private.

Chapter 12 has four divisions:

- Jesus is anointed at Bethany [1-11];
- Triumphal entry into Jerusalem [12-19];
- Jesus is sought by the Greeks [20-36];
- Jesus is rejected by the Jews [37-50].

The anointing of Jesus is a touching scene because the person anointing Him is in the act of pure worship. She ignores all custom and is criticized by those who watched.

Anointing is a practice found in the OT and the NT. Anointing can be for ceremonial cleansing or to sanctify or to set apart for the service of God. In our text for today Jesus explains that this anointing was for His burial.

The commentaries are all over the place as to how many times Jesus was anointed; when He was anointed and by whom and where.

The anointing recorded in Luke 7:36-50 says it happened at the house of a Pharisee but the name of the woman is not given.

Luke 7:36-39

Then one of the Pharisees asked Him to eat with him. And He went to the Pharisee's house, and sat down to eat. 37 And behold, a woman in the city who was a sinner, when she knew that Jesus sat at the table in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster flask of fragrant oil, 38 and stood at His feet behind Him weeping; and she began to wash His feet with her tears, and wiped them with the hair of her head; and she kissed His feet and anointed them with the fragrant oil. 39 Now when the Pharisee who had invited Him saw this, he spoke to himself, saying, "This Man, if He were a prophet, would know who and what manner of woman this is who is touching Him, for she is a sinner."

This woman surely cannot be the sweet Mary of Bethany and she is most likely Mary Magdalene referred to as a “sinner” by the Pharisee.

Matthew, Mark, and John each record, what I believe is another single anointing by Mary of Bethany. There is a difficulty in deciding where this anointing occurred. If two different houses are involved, then one is the home of Mary in Bethany and the other is the house of Simon the Leper and that would lead you to Mary of Bethany anointing Jesus on two occasions.

It is my conclusion that the anointing in Luke is one by Mary Magdalene and that Matthew, Mark, and John record a single anointing by Mary of Bethany at the house of Simon the Leper. I will try to make this conclusion clearer in a moment.

There is also the question of when, and that is what leads some commentators to conclude that Mary of Bethany anointed Jesus on two separate occasions.

Then, six days before the Passover...

John Calvin and others translate this “Before the sixth day of Passover.”

Passover was a seven-day feast and so sometime before the sixth day of the Passover week, Mary the sister of Lazarus, anointed Jesus.

Let’s read Matthew and Mark:

Matthew 26:1-16

Now it came to pass, when Jesus had finished all these sayings, that He said to His disciples, 2 "You know that after two days is the Passover, and the Son of Man will be delivered up to be crucified."

3 Then the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders of the people assembled at the palace of the high priest, who was called Caiaphas, 4 and plotted to take Jesus by trickery and kill Him. 5 But they said, "Not during the feast, lest there be an uproar among the people."

6 And when Jesus was in Bethany at the house of Simon the leper, 7 a woman came to Him having an alabaster flask of very costly fragrant oil, and she poured it on His head as He sat at the table. 8 But when His disciples saw it, they were indignant, saying, "Why this waste? 9 For this fragrant oil might have been sold for much and given to the poor."

10 But when Jesus was aware of it, He said to them, "Why do you trouble the woman? For she has done a good work for Me. 11 For you have the poor with you always, but Me you do not have always. 12 For in pouring this fragrant oil on My body, she did it for My burial. 13 Assuredly, I say to you, wherever this gospel is preached in the whole world, what this woman has done will also be told as a memorial to her."

14 Then one of the twelve, called Judas Iscariot, went to the chief priests 15 and said, "What are you willing to give me if I deliver Him to you?" And they counted out to him thirty pieces of silver. 16 So from that time he sought opportunity to betray Him.

Mark 14:1-11

After two days it was the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread. And the chief priests and the scribes sought how they might take Him by trickery and put Him to death. 2 But they said, "Not during the feast, lest there be an uproar of the people." 3 And being in Bethany at the house of Simon the leper, as He sat at the table, a woman came having an alabaster flask of very costly oil of spikenard. Then she broke the flask and poured it on His head. 4 But there were some who were indignant among themselves, and said, "Why was this fragrant oil wasted?"

5 For it might have been sold for more than three hundred denarii and given to the poor." And they criticized her sharply.

6 But Jesus said, "Let her alone. Why do you trouble her? She has done a good work for Me. 7 For you have the poor with you always, and whenever you wish you may do them good; but Me you do not have always. 8 She has done what she could. She has come beforehand to anoint My body for burial. 9 Assuredly, I say to you, wherever this gospel is preached in the whole world, what this woman has done will also be told as a memorial to her." 10 Then Judas Iscariot, one of the twelve, went to the chief priests to betray Him to them. 11 And when they heard it, they were glad, and promised to give him money. So he sought how he might conveniently betray Him.

My conclusion is that there is only one anointing by Mary of Bethany and it is at the house of Simon the leper. Mathew, Mark, and John give virtually the same complaint about the waste of the expensive ointment. It would not be impossible for this anointing and complaint to have occurred twice but it does not seem likely to me.

John Calvin explains the timing and anointing this way.

Having come to Bethany six days before the Passover, he remained there four days; which may easily be inferred from Matthew and Mark. On what day the banquet was made for him, at which he was anointed by Mary, John does not state; but it seems probable that it took place not long after he had arrived. There are some who think that, the anointing mentioned by Matthew (Matthew 26:7) and Mark (Mark 14:3) is different from what is mentioned here; but they are mistaken. They have been led to adopt this view by a calculation of time, because the two Evangelists, (Matthew 26:2; Mark 14:1,) before relating that Christ was anointed, speak of two days as having elapsed.

But the solution is easy, and may be given in two ways. For John does not say that Christ was anointed on the first day after his arrival; so that this might happen even when he was preparing to depart. Yet, as I have already said, there is another conjecture which is more probable, that he was anointed one day, at least, or two days, before his departure; for it is certain that Judas had made a bargain with the priests, before Christ sent two of his disciples to make ready the Passover. Now, at the very least, one day must have intervened. The Evangelists add, that he sought a convenient opportunity for betraying Christ, (Matthew 26:16,) after having received the bribe. When, therefore, after mentioning *two days*, they add the history of the anointing, they place last in the narrative what happened first. And the reason is, that after having related the words of Christ, You know that after two days the Son of man shall be betrayed, (Matthew 26:2,) they now add — what had been formerly omitted — in what manner and on what occasion he was betrayed by his disciple. There is thus a perfect agreement in the account of his having been anointed at Bethany.

And so John Calvin would be impressed that I agree with him. So much for the technical aspects of the day of the Passover week and how many times Jesus was anointed.

Then, six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, where Lazarus was who had been dead, whom He had raised from the dead. 2 There they made Him a supper; and Martha served, but Lazarus was one of those who sat at the table with Him.

The raising of Lazarus from the grave after he had been dead for four days is the irrefutable proof that Jesus is Messiah. With all of the things that Jesus claimed for Himself and His “breaking” of the Sabbath according to the traditions of the scribes and the Pharisees, the raising of Lazarus from the dead seems to be the final provocation of the Jewish leaders to murder Jesus.

Simon the Leper and Martha and Mary and Lazarus are taking a great risk. The chief priests and Pharisees had issued a decree that Jesus should be reported [10:57]. Instead of reporting Him, He is given a supper. Matthew and Mark tell us that the supper is at the home of Simon the Leper. Lazarus was there as a guest along with Jesus which is made clear in verse 2. Lazarus would not be seated as a guest in his own home.

Martha is doing what she does - serving. But I do not believe she is to be criticized here as she was on another occasion when Martha had complained that Mary was not helping her.

Luke 10:38-42

Now it happened as they went that He entered a certain village; and a certain woman named Martha welcomed Him into her house. 39 And she had a sister called Mary, who also sat at Jesus' feet and heard His word. 40 But Martha was distracted with much serving, and she approached Him and said, "Lord, do You not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Therefore tell her to help me."

41 And Jesus answered and said to her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and troubled about many things. 42 But one thing is needed, and Mary has chosen that good part, which will not be taken away from her."

Here, on this occasion, I believe Martha is not distracted and is able to hear what Jesus has to say. Jesus had corrected her priorities and not what she loved to do. Serving does not come before attending to God's word.

This is not said to hurt your feelings ladies, but I think your priorities are wrong if you miss church in order to prepare Sunday dinner for guests.

3 Then Mary took a pound of very costly oil of spikenard, anointed the feet of Jesus, and wiped His feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the oil.

Spikenard is an herb grown in the high Himalayas. The high cost was due to the long camelback journey to transport it.

What a scene: a valuable alabaster vase containing a pound of pure nard! Fragrant oil worth a year's wages! Even at today's minimum wage it would be about \$12,000.

Ignoring custom, Mary lets down her hair in the presence of the men. There is so much nard! She wipes the excess with her hair; she unashamedly demonstrates her devotion for Jesus without regard to custom or cost.

Only Mary understood the significance of what was about to happen. Jesus had told His disciples that He was going to be crucified but that fact had not registered with them. After His resurrection they would know. But Mary had sat at the feet of Jesus and had understood. And so she anoints Jesus for His burial.

4 But one of His disciples, Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, who would betray Him, said, 5 "Why was this fragrant oil not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?"

Contrast the generosity of Mary and the selfishness of Judas. Judas had calculated the value of the nard. See how deeply concerned is Judas for the poor.

Take note of how critical and unkind people can be. Mary alone knew what was going on and out of her love and devotion she offers an extravagant gift. Jesus had taught the disciples for three years and they still did not understand.

The complaint was a false option as the apostle tells us in verse 6.

6 This he said, not that he cared for the poor, but because he was a thief, and had the money box; and he used to take what was put in it.

Judas had everyone fooled except Jesus. Judas was the treasurer of the group and so the other disciples trusted him.

Judas preached and cast out demons and did whatever the others did which is evident because there was no suspicion that he was a thief and that he would betray Jesus. Remember that John is writing this about 60 some odd years after the event. At the time it happened neither John nor anyone else but Jesus knew what was in the heart and mind of Judas.

7 But Jesus said, "Let her alone; she has kept this for the day of My burial.

This is no "accident." We don't know when Mary thought to do this but Jesus said God planned it.

Jesus defends His own. Jesus rebukes the disciples. Mary had learned much at His feet. She believed that He would soon die.

8 For the poor you have with you always, but Me you do not have always."

We will not spend time on it now but the phrase, "**but Me you do not have always**" certainly contradicts Rome's claim for the "real presence" of Christ in the "transubstantiation" of the Mass.

"For the poor you have with you always..."

All the well-meant efforts to relieve the poor are good things in and of themselves. We are clearly instructed in the Scriptures to help those who are in need. But there will always be poor people.

The point here is to keep our priorities straight. The social gospel does not take the place of the true gospel. People need to repent and believe in the gospel first and then do whatever else is needed to help the needy.

9 Now a great many of the Jews knew that He was there; and they came, not for Jesus' sake only, but that they might also see Lazarus, whom He had raised from the dead.

Curiosity! Wouldn't you like to see a man who was raised from the dead? It seems to me that a lot of people are more interested in things associated with Jesus than Jesus Himself and in so doing that they have missed the point.

People will travel thousands of miles to go to some “holy place” or go to some open field where some poor misguided soul said she saw the Virgin Mary but they are not interested in the gospel itself.

A simple exposition of the Bible will not hold their attention very long.

10 But the chief priests plotted to put Lazarus to death also, 11 because on account of him many of the Jews went away and believed in Jesus.

The chief priests were absolutely ruthless. The chief priests would be Sadducees who deny the resurrection and so what an offense is Lazarus to them. They are willing to commit murder rather than admit they are in error. Here is a man who was dead for four days walking around in good health and eating real food and yet they will not believe that Jesus is the Sent One of God!

In a test concerning the doctrine of the resurrection the Sadducees were the ones who had tried to trap Jesus with their hypothetical case about a woman who had seven husbands.

Matthew 22:23-33

The same day the Sadducees, who say there is no resurrection, came to Him and asked Him, 24 saying: "Teacher, Moses said that if a man dies, having no children, his brother shall marry his wife and raise up offspring for his brother. 25 Now there were with us seven brothers. The first died after he had married, and having no offspring, left his wife to his brother. 26 Likewise the second also, and the third, even to the seventh. 27 Last of all the woman died also. 28 Therefore, in the resurrection, whose wife of the seven will she be? For they all had her."

29 Jesus answered and said to them, "You are mistaken, not knowing the Scriptures nor the power of God. 30 For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels of God in heaven. 31 But concerning the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was spoken to you by God, saying, 32'I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? God is not the God of the dead, but of the living." 33 And when the multitudes heard this, they were astonished at His teaching.

The chief priests are threatened both politically and theologically.

Now the Sadducees are faced with Lazarus whom Jesus raised from the dead. Remember what the council had determined in chapter 11 and what Caiaphas had said.

John 11:45-52

Then many of the Jews who had come to Mary, and had seen the things Jesus did, believed in Him. 46 But some of them went away to the Pharisees and told them the things Jesus did. 47 Then the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered a council and said, "What shall we do? For this Man works many signs. 48 If we let Him alone like this, everyone will believe in Him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and nation."

49 And one of them, Caiaphas, being high priest that year, said to them, "You know nothing at all, 50 nor do you consider that it is expedient for us that one man should die for the people, and not that the whole nation should perish." 51 Now this he did not say on his own authority; but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation, 52 and not for that nation only, but also that He would gather together in one the children of God who were scattered abroad.

They refused to believe in Jesus as the Messiah and so now they must destroy the evidence. They decide to kill Lazarus. Would it not occur to them that if Jesus could raise Lazarus up from the dead that they would not be able to do anything to him that Jesus would not allow? But here they are plotting to kill Lazarus.

In 11:50 it was expedient to kill "one Man". Now they must kill another man, Lazarus. Later they would kill Steven and James and Peter.

Lazarus was undeniable proof of who Jesus is. Many believed on Jesus because of Lazarus. Lazarus was a testimony to the power and goodness of God.

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