

John on Jesus - The Biblical Case for Extravagant Living

April 28, 2013

We are studying the Gospel of John. This morning, we are in John 12:1-8. I ask you to turn in your Bible to that passage. Take out your outlines. If you didn't bring a Bible, use the one in the pew pocket in front of you. You will find John 12 on page 898.

One of the things I love about the Gospel of John is its theology. The Gospel of John is crystal clear that Jesus is God in the flesh who came to die for our sins. If we repent of our sins and ask Jesus' death on the cross to be the payment for our sins, we are brought into a relationship with God now and we are saved eternally by nothing more than our faith. The Gospel of John hits this truth again and again like a hammer pounding a nail into a block of wood.

The Gospel of John is not all theology. It also gives beautiful windows into how Jesus loves ordinary people. For instance, we saw Jesus' care for the woman at the well. She was a woman that most people ran from but Jesus cared. We saw Jesus' love for the outcasts when he healed the man born blind. John didn't just give us theology for book-heads, he showed us that Jesus loves ordinary people with ordinary struggles.

This morning, we come to what is one of the most powerful portraits of love in the entire book; it is Mary's great act of love for Jesus.

Background

Six days before the Passover, Jesus therefore came to Bethany, where Lazarus was, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. John 12:1 (ESV)

In chapter 10, while in Jerusalem at the Feast of Dedication, the Jews pressed Jesus to make a public statement about his identity. Jesus miraculously healed scores of people. The Jews were impressed but they didn't know what to call him. They couldn't find a label for him. Was he a prophet? Was he some type of a healer? Who is Jesus?

Jesus gave them the answer. It blew them away when, for the first time publicly, he revealed his identity. He said, "I and the Father are one." The Jews went bananas. How could a mere man be God? They accused him of blasphemy and threatened him with death. At the end of chapter 10, he left Jerusalem for the other side of the Jordan River to escape the Jewish lynch mob.

In chapter 11, Jesus was sent the ancient version of a text message from his friends Mary and Martha, who lived in Bethany, a suburb of Jerusalem, just two miles outside of the city. Lazarus, Mary and Martha's brother, a good friend of Jesus', was sick. The M&M sisters wanted Jesus to heal him before he died.

To their amazement, like an elderly driver, Jesus took his time returning to Bethany. When he arrived, Lazarus was dead. To the shock of Mary and Martha, a dead and rotten Lazarus was exactly what Jesus wanted. The greater the obstacle, the more glory that goes to Jesus when he overcomes it. Instead of healing a sick Lazarus, he raised a dead and rotten Lazarus. As a result, Jesus went from famous to infamous. He went from being on the Jews' hit list to being at the top of the list. People couldn't stop talking about Jesus. They remembered Lazarus' funeral. They attended it. They saw his cold dead body.

They read his obituary in the paper. Now, he was alive and drinking a latte at the local Starbucks. That kind of news travels fast.

After Lazarus' resurrection, Jesus left Jerusalem for the area of Ephraim. It was his way of getting out of town before the Jews lynched him. In John 12, Passover was approaching. It was six days away. Most Jews returned to Jerusalem for Passover. Everyone was hoping to meet Jesus.

Before we go further, we need to pause and look at the Passover. The Passover is important to help us date Jesus' ministry. The Gospel of John tells us Jesus' ministry lasted through three Passovers. The first was in John 2, where Jesus cleansed the temple the first time. The second was in John 6. For that Passover, Jesus was not in Jerusalem. He was in the northern rural region of Galilee. In John 12, it was the third Passover. Jesus was crucified only six days after this Passover. This tells us Jesus' ministry lasted more than two years but less than three. It was through three Passovers.

Something you may find strange is that we are only halfway through the Gospel of John and we are already on the final six days of Jesus' life. The way John structured this Gospel is the first half of the Gospel covers the two plus years of Jesus' ministry. The second half of the Gospel focuses on the last six days of his life and resurrection. This chapter is the hinge of the book. In John 1-11, John looked at Jesus' ministry with a wide-angle lens as he focused on only seven of Jesus' miracles. From this point forward, John used his zoom-lens to examine the final six days of Jesus' life in detail. This major shift in John is why we changed graphics for the series.

Another thing you need to understand is how Passover was celebrated in Jewish culture. This was one of the big holidays of the Jewish year. Plenty of people came to town for this holiday. A few decades after this, Josephus, the ancient Jewish historian, estimated the population in Jerusalem over Passover to be at 2.7 million people. Let's put that in perspective — Facebook says there are only 16,000 Facebook users within a 20-mile radius around our building. Sioux Fall, SD, only has 156,000 people. The population of Chicago is 2.7 million. You get the idea that Jerusalem was packed for the holidays. Many of those people were talking about Jesus. Jesus was so popular that the Jewish leaders felt he was unsettling the city so they planned to bump him off.

To make matters worse, this guy named Lazarus was doing interviews on CNN, Larry King and Ellen holding his own death certificate and telling people how Jesus brought him out of the grave.

So they gave a dinner for him there. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those reclining with him at table. John 12:2 (ESV)

This was a dinner given in Jesus' honor. The sisters were filled with gratitude for Jesus raising their brother from the dead. They didn't know what they could do to express their gratitude until somebody hit on the idea of giving a meal in his honor. This would not be an ordinary meal. It would be a big meal. It would be a meal to remember.

Maybe you have been around women like this. The way they show their love is through cooking and hospitality. My mother is one of these people. When we visit my parents, my mother is always in the kitchen. She loves you by feeding you. Cindy and I have a running joke about the night Cindy first met my

parents. My mom put a huge plate of food in front of a 120-pound woman. Cindy, not wanting to offend my mother, was trying to eat what was put in front of her but she just couldn't do it. She was worried she offended my mother because she couldn't finish her dinner and my mother was worried Cindy didn't like her food. Thankfully, today it is something to laugh about. At the time, Cindy was worried.

Martha was one of those women that loves you by feeding you. We learned this last week. She was very cerebral. She was action-oriented. She loved her kitchen. For this meal, she ditched her own kitchen, according to the parallel passages that talk about this meal in Mark and Matthew, and she went to a bigger house, the house of Simon, the leper. With Jesus in the house, maybe should I say "Simon the ex-leper." Martha created this huge meal to love on Jesus and the disciples.

Last week, we learned about Mary. While biologically related to Martha, she was nothing like her sister. Martha was stoic. Mary was emotional. Four days after Lazarus' funeral, Mary was still crying. When she met Jesus, four days after Lazarus' funeral, she was such an emotional wreck that she collapsed at his feet. I know some of you guys shook your head when I talked about Mary last week because you think such an emotionally-driven woman would drive you nuts. In this story, we discover the upside of someone like Mary. While she was a woman who hurt deeply, the emotional woman expressed her love passionately.

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. John 12:3 (ESV)

In that day, in a formal dining setting, the men laid on couches where their heads all faced inward toward a low table. Their feet were toward the outside. This was a formal meal. It was the best meal Mary and Martha could give to express their thanks.

While the boys were reclining on couches and wiping their mouths on their sleeves, the finest of food was brought in. Martha, the human dynamo, was in the kitchen. It was a 12-course meal that consisted of her favorite recipes.

Things were extravagant, but they were predicable, until Mary, the emotionally-driven woman, unleashed her plan to show love and appreciation to Jesus. She took a pound of pure nard and began to anoint Jesus. This nard was spikenard. It is from India. In its concentrated form, it is very powerful. She didn't use a few drops, she emptied the entire bottle on him. Typically, nard was used like the Mio sport drink mix. You add one or two drops of it to water and that is all you needed because nard is so concentrated. She didn't add water. She used it straight. In the account of this meal told in Matthew and Mark, we find she not only put the nard on Jesus' feet but she began by pouring it on his head and beard. That makes sense because an entire pound of pure spikenard was more than enough for his feet. A pound of nard was enough to anoint his body.

Spikenard is potent stuff. It didn't wash off because it soaked into your skin. It is like cleaning fish. No matter how many times you wash, your hands

smell like fish days later. That is spikenard. This is ultra-pungent perfume she put on his head and feet.

In their culture, you didn't bath for days at a time. The smell of pure spikenard lingered on Jesus for days. Jesus had long hair and a beard, which held the smell of nard.

One other item I should note is the cost of this kind of nard. The Greek text says it was worth 300 denarii. A denarii is a day's wage for a common laborer. We are talking about a bottle of perfume worth about \$35,000. I don't know where this perfume came from. I don't know if Mary had it lying around the house. I don't know if she went out and bought it. All I know is that one thing is clear. This was extravagant!

Why did John not talk about the anointing of Jesus' head, the anointing for a king, but instead focus on Mary anointing Jesus' feet?

Summer is coming. Like many of you, I am looking forward to wearing sandals. The problem with sandals is when they get wet, they start to smell. Feet can smell bad. Anybody ever had a serious case of foot odor? In the ancient world, they didn't have socks. They wore leather sandals, which were great to breed fungus. They walked on muddy dirt roads, where the main form of transportation was an animal that defecated on the road. Can you say, "Bacteria?" In the ancient world, feet were dirty. They were smelly. They stunk.

In that day, it was the lowest slave of the house that cleaned the feet of a guest when he or she came to dinner. Foot cleansing was the most humbling job

for the lowest of people. After all, in a formal dining situation, why do you think they had their feet as far away from the food as possible?

Mary didn't just anoint the head of Jesus, she went to the dirtiest, most unlovely part of Jesus, stinky feet. This was extremely humbling for a woman of Mary's stature. Remember she could afford a bottle of perfume worth \$35,000. It was unheard of for a woman of her calibre to humble herself like this. In anointing Jesus' feet, everyone got the message about how much she loved Jesus.

Not only did she go to the feet and use the nard, but she used her own hair to wipe his feet clean. In that culture, a young girl was allowed to have her hair down in public. When a girl matured into a woman, she wore her hair up. A mature woman always had long hair. Just as women today pride themselves on the beauty of their hair, it was the same in the ancient world. A woman's glory was her long beautiful hair. Since women wore their hair up, their beauty was hidden from public view. In fact, part of the Jewish tradition for the wedding night was the husband reached behind his wife's head and unbundled her hair, letting it cascaded over her shoulders. It was in that moment, with her hair down, when he saw his wife in all of her glory.

Mary took her beautiful long hair down in public. Her hair was a source of pride. She used it to wipe the stinking feet of Jesus. For those of you who are wondering, there is nothing sinful about this. Was it culturally abnormal? Yes! Was it sinful? No! They were in a public room. She was not touching Jesus in a sexual way. She was sending a message to Jesus, and everyone else present,

that she was filled with love for Jesus for raising her brother from the dead. She was showering that love upon Jesus in the most extravagant way possible. An entire bottle of perfume of immense value on Jesus; a woman of means and wealth wiping and anointing the stinking feet of Jesus; feet, a place even the slaves dreaded to go, were wiped clean with her hair, the source of her glory and beauty. Are you getting the message of her heart? “Jesus, I love you so much the only way I can express my love is with extravagance.”

The problem is, some people in the room thought this was a little over the top. Isn't a \$35,000 bottle of perfume a bit excessive? We are religious people. We are not supposed to throw extravagant parties. Imagine what will happen to the support base if it gets out in public that when Jesus parties, he spends \$35,000 on perfume.

Expedience

But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (he who was about to betray him), said, “Why was this ointment not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?” 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. John 12:4–6 (ESV)

If you have been around the church for a while, you know there are people who have the gift of criticism. There are people who rebel against extravagance. I remember conversations in a church I served where they argued over buying name brand versus generic dixie cups for the bathroom. These are the people who argue for watering down the coffee so it looks like tea to make it last longer. After all, we don't want anyone to think we are extravagant. Those are what I call Judas conversations. Judas, who later betrayed Jesus, spoke up, “Mary, this is

excessive. This is a waste of good money. You should have given us the perfume; we could have sold it to give to the poor. We should have skipped this whole anointing thing.” The text tells us that Judas was actually a thief. His real motive wasn’t helping the poor, but when he saw something expensive he wanted to turn it into cash so he could charge a handling fee and skim off the top. He was motivated by greed.

Many times, things are not what they seem. On the surface Judas looked like the good religious guy who was concerned with the poor and Mary looked like the emotional woman who wasn’t thinking about how she was spending money lavishly. God looks at the heart. What God saw is Judas’ conservatism was rooted in greed. Mary’s extravagance was rooted in gratitude. Which heart pleased him?

If you looked under the hood on Judas’ heart, you would find a man who didn’t really love Jesus. You would find a man in love with the position he held in Jesus’ organization. He liked the people and the busyness, but he really didn’t love Jesus. That is why he saw Mary’s extravagance as out of place. He felt it was inappropriate to go extravagant for Jesus because Jesus was not that big of a deal in his heart.

Folks, Judas is still alive around churches today. His descendants feel going extravagant to make much of Jesus is out of place. There is a time to go extravagant, to spend and act extravagantly. Spend and act extravagantly when it is for Jesus!

With Judas sniping Mary for her extravagant act of love, Jesus stepped to the plate and put Judas in his place.

Jesus

Jesus said, “Leave her alone, so 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.” John 12:7–8 (ESV)

Let’s begin at the end. Jesus was not telling us to neglect the poor. He was saying the poor will always be with us. Nobody is going to eliminate poverty. I don’t care how much government assistance they hand out.

While the poor will always be around, Jesus won’t. There was a limited window of opportunity for Mary to show her love to Jesus. She was taking advantage of that opportunity. I don’t know if she realized this consciously. For each of us, there is a limited window of opportunity to show our love for Jesus. Before we know it, that window of opportunity will pass.

Jesus also said to leave her alone because she was preparing him for the day of his burial. In this culture, where they did not have showers, I cannot help but think the odor of the pungent nard, which permeated Jesus’ hair and skin, would hang around for days. Six days later, Jesus would be hanging on the cross, while the smell of Mary’s nard was still emanating from his body. As he hung on the cross, his body screamed in agony. I cannot help but think that as he gasped for breath, the smell the Mary’s extravagant love would be an immense encouragement as his life dangled over the edge of death.

Conclusion

When you think about these verses, it tells you there are two kinds of followers of Christ in the church. Some are like Judas. They are part of the church, but they just don't get it. Others are like Mary and Martha. They are known for the gratefulness in their hearts and the extravagant acts of irrational love for Jesus in their lives.

Which one are you?

Prayer - Jesus, thank you for your incredible love for us. We confess that we are guilty of conservatism and pragmatism. We are guilty of trying to do things small and safe. We ask for your forgiveness. Today, help us to be people known for extravagance, for over-the-top acts of love for you. May the acts of love in our lives be like the sweet smell of Mary's spikenard before you today.



Dr. Kurt Trucksess is ordained in the EFCA. He enjoys reading, writing, time with his family and wrestling with his sons. His favorite topics of study are ancient rhetoric and preaching. Feel free to contact him at ktruck@gmail.com or visit his web at www.christ2Rculture.com

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