

## Extravagant Love

John 12:1-11

Some years ago a good friend related to me what he decided to do for his fiancée the Valentines' Day before they were to be married. He decided to surprise her by taking her out to dinner. And it was a surprise when he showed up at her door, for they lived about 900 miles apart. Such an impulsive, extravagant display of loving affection was surely one of the primary ways in which he won that young woman's heart.

Now, as men, we seldom do things like that, don't we? And I'm going to get all of us husbands in a bit of trouble with our wives, today, especially with Valentines' Day coming up in just eight days. As men, seldom do we think in terms of extravagant love as the motivation for giving gifts to our wives. But my point tonight goes much deeper. For what is presented to us in John 12 is an extravagant, even recklessly impulsive, display of love toward Jesus by a woman. There is, of course, no hint whatsoever of romantic affection, but love of a far deeper kind. Spiritual love for Christ by a godly woman named Mary, love that stands out for its incredible, incomparable extravagance.

And so as we men might sheepishly confess our relatively infrequent displays of reckless romantic affection, let all of us be willing to consider and confess the sinfulness of the coldness of our hearts in the failure to demonstrate our love for Jesus in appropriately lavish and extraordinary demonstrations of devotion.

Like Mary.

v.1-3

That is,

## I. AN ACT OF LOVE.

There is no other way to describe it.

In Mark 14, we are actually told of another anointing by Mary two days before the passover, and both demonstrate her unrestrained love. The details are so very striking. There was a lot of ointment. A pound. It was very costly. Pure nard, or spikenard, an aromatic herb grown in the high pasture land of the Himalayas, between Tibet and India. It was grown, and procured, in a very remote region, carried on camel-back through miles and miles of mountain-passes, and very high priced. There was no substitute. No imitation. No generic brand.

Mary had a whole jar. Worth, at least in Judas' estimation, three hundred denarii. Considering a denarius to be approximately a day's wage, you can figure this total to be comparable to a full year's salary today. A full year's salary worth of perfume, used to anoint our Lord.

The normal method of anointing would be to anoint the head, and we can presume that if there were two anointings by Mary, as I believe there were, then the method would have been the same as what is described in,

Mark 14:3 "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."

She broke the flask and poured it on his head, with such abundance that it flowed over his whole body--head, neck and shoulders, even the feet. A pound of ointment is a large quantity! And she emptied the whole bottle. The whole house was filled with the fragrance of the oil.

Why? What is the motivation for this seemingly wasteful and reckless act? And why wasn't Mary serving the food at the table like her sister Martha?

Clearly, clearly, Jesus honors her without reservation, so we know therefore that what she did was a good thing. And you can explain this good thing best by emphasizing the devotion of her heart, devotion to Jesus.

#### **A. Extravagant devotion.**

Extravagant, reckless, unreserved, unhesitating, unqualified, unrestrained, lavish devotion. Mary is outwardly demonstrating such devotion in a way that no one else did.

Surely it can be said of Mary, in this instance, that she loved the LORD her God with all her heart, with all her soul, and with all her strength. And the inward motivation that prompts such an act of love is exactly what Jesus refers to when he quotes that passage from Deuteronomy as the summary of the whole law, the first and greatest commandment.

And we shouldn't try to diminish the nature of this devotion by suggesting that Mary had used the oil for Lazarus' burial, and had some left over which she used for Jesus. This was not left over oil, this was a whole jar, and she had to break the jar in order in order to pour it all out.

There is nothing here that should detract from the praise that Mary is due, and her actions are in keeping with what we already know about her, for we read in,

Luke 10:38 "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."

Mary consistently chose to demonstrate her devotion. Extravagant devotion. But let me add even one more thing in praise of Mary. She not only poured out this whole flask of precious oil, but then she wiped off Jesus' feet with her own hair. A couple thoughts about that.

First, such an act was in complete disregard of Oriental rules of propriety, which viewed with definite disfavor the action of a woman to loosen her hair in the presence of men. Mary not only unbinds her hair but even worse, from the perspective of the Oriental culture, uses her hair to wipe his feet. She is not thinking at all about cultural propriety and therefore not about her own reputation. She thinks only of Christ. And with such an abundance of oil that it required drying, she dries it up.

Now, in the countries of the middle east, where it is very hot, and where feet are often exposed to the heat by the use of open sandals, the feet would obviously become vulnerable to suffer much from dryness and scorching. And it would often be the responsibility of a woman, but more commonly a slave, to wash the feet of houseguests. It was a very menial task, and one which came to exemplify,

#### **B. Humble service.**

Such humble service became a way to identify godliness in older women, as Paul writes in,

1 Tim.5:9 “Do not let a widow under sixty years old be taken into the number, and not unless she has been the wife of one man, 10 well reported for good works: if she has brought up children, if she has lodged strangers, if she has washed the saints' feet, if she has relieved the afflicted, if she has diligently followed every good work.”

Surely, with Mary’s extravagant devotion to Jesus, we can praise her for such humble service. And Jesus himself displays such humble service when he performed that menial duty for his disciples,

John 13:3-5,12-17

In that great lesson, Jesus imitates the devotion and humility of this godly woman named Mary, the sister of Lazarus, the man he raised from the dead.

Please feel the effect of this example of Mary’s love in your own heart. Be humbled, and brought to repentance, at the coldness of your own heart, when you fail to display such unrestrained affection for our Lord Jesus. For this is love, in action, displayed before us this evening. This is what it means to love Jesus. This is what is most important. This is the good for which we will be honored and rewarded on the day of judgment. So stir up your hearts. And throw caution to the wind, as it were. Don’t measure or ration your acts of loving devotion to Jesus. Just follow Mary’s example.

It would be foolish to think the application of this is that we should have incense and expensive fragrant oils as part of our worship service, for the whole sense here is the devotion of the heart. There is no warrant here for utilizing such outward elements of worship simply because they are expensive. It’s not

just that we spend money on Jesus. But rather that our whole heart, and therefore our whole life, is devoted to him. That could, and would, honestly say, “For me, to live is Christ.”

There are times when that will mean great financial commitment, beginning, of course, with the cheerful giving of your tithes, to say nothing of your time and energy. But what really matters, is the devotion of the heart.

To go back to my friend who took his fiancée’ out for dinner on Valentines’ Day, what impressed her, I’m sure, was not the cost of the gasoline that he had to put in his car to drive those 900 miles to visit her. I doubt that she calculated how much it cost him to make the trip, or even how much the dinner cost. But I am quite sure that she did measure the devotion of his heart that was expressed by his willingness to put everything else in his life aside to be with her, at such great personal cost.

As it is with one another, let it be in our relationship with Jesus,

1 John 3:18 “My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth.”

Not everyone appreciated what Mary did, however, and, in particular, we see in Judas,

## **II. A RESPONSE OF HATE.**

v.4-6

His true colors are being revealed, and with John’s additional comments, we realized that Judas’ betrayal of Jesus was anything but an isolated incident. For Judas was a thief! He was evil and wicked through and through. Ryle notes that “it appears

impossible to prove that Judas ever had the grace of God at any time, and that he only fell away at last. he was inwardly wrong at heart all the way through.”

Ryle does go on to warn us, “Let us note how far a man may go in Christian profession without any inward grace. There is no evidence that Judas up to this time was unlike other Apostles... Yet he was at bottom a graceless man. Privileges alone convert nobody.”

Judas does something that wicked men still seek to do. He takes something good and tries to make it look bad. He observes this great and godly act of devotion that we have emphasized today, and criticizes it. He finds cause to rebuke Mary.

Matthew Henry comments, with such great wisdom, that “coldness of love to Christ, and a secret contempt of sincere godliness, when they appear in those who profess faith, are sad predictors of final apostasy.”

Coldness of love for Christ and contempt of those whose love for Christ is warm go hand in hand, don't they? Those who really don't love God get easily offended by the actions of those who do!

And often, as in Judas' case, their hypocrisy becomes clearly evident.

#### **A. Self-serving hypocrisy.**

Notice Judas' criticism, his objection to Mary's actions.

v.4-5

Good thought, on the surface, it seems. Shouldn't we be taking care of the poor? Isn't it a waste to spend such a great amount of money on a one-time act of anointing when we could

by food to keep the poor alive?

On the surface, those seem to be legitimate questions. But under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, John leaves no doubt about what lies under the surface of Judas' questions.

v.6

Apparently, at the time, nobody knew that Judas was stealing from the apostolic treasury, though it obviously became common knowledge after his death. John's point is clear and pointed! Judas was a hypocrite. Uncomfortable at the genuine devotion of this godly woman, he pretends to be concerned with the poor, but that concern is only a thin veil for his own greed. He really wanted the perfume sold so that he could embezzle the money for himself.

With Judas, I ought to emphasize the amazing power of the love of money. For many, like Judas, it is such a besetting sin, one which Paul identifies as the root of all evil!

1 Tim. 6:10 “For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, for which some have strayed from the faith in their greediness, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows.”

With a bit more of the context, Paul writes,

1 Tim. 6:7 “For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out. 8 And having food and clothing, with these we shall be content. 9 But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and harmful lusts which drown men in destruction and perdition.”

Like Judas!

But Judas isn't the only one who displays wickedness. There are again mentioned the chief priests, the leaders of the Jews.

v.9-11

There are the curiosity seekers, the ones wanting to see this man who had been raised from the dead. And human nature hasn't changed much, which is why circus side shows still draw a lot of people and make a lot of money, and why mindless and inane television talk shows have sprouted up everywhere the past few years. The love of something sensational.

For many, Lazarus has become a bit of a side show. And that really bothers the chief priest, because that curiosity might actually turn into faith. If people came to see Lazarus, they might be convinced to believe in Jesus!

And the chief priests couldn't let that happen! They couldn't sit back and let the popularity of Jesus increase. So they decided to kill Lazarus! Put to death the one whom Jesus raised from the dead. Such,

### **B. Unrestrained evil.**

Think about it. The chief priests couldn't possibly deny the fact that Jesus had been raised, or explain it away. Liberals today might try to do that, but they couldn't then. There were too many eyewitnesses. And Lazarus, therefore, became a witness against their own unbelief. An overwhelming witness. But rather than submit, and believe, they determined to kill Lazarus, thinking that by killing him they could put an end to the growth of Jesus' popularity.

v.10-11

They were willing to kill not only Jesus, but also Lazarus, an innocent bystander, really, for them. They were absolutely

ruthless. Lazarus himself had done nothing wrong, nothing to offend the chief priests. Just that he was raised from the dead. And they couldn't stand the testimony of his continuing life to go on.

So they conspired to commit murder. In a response of hate. Hatred toward Jesus. And hatred toward those who would love Jesus. Such as Mary.

Let's end by going back to Mary, and looking at the praise she receives from Jesus.

### **III. AN EXPLANATION OF HONOR.**

v.7-8

Clearly those are words of praise, And as we read of the anointing two days before the Passover,

Mark 14:6 Jesus said, "Let her alone. Why do you trouble her? She has done a good work for Me...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."

Why such praise? Two reasons particularly are given here. First, praise for her,

#### **A. Timely service.**

v.7

Now, it's not that Jesus encourages Mary to keep the fragrant oil for his burial, for she poured it all out already. Rather, Jesus is himself predicting his own death and burial, and though Mary might not have been fully aware of the connection, he says that her anointing is an act of preparation for burial.

Now, normally, a body would be anointed prior to being put in the tomb, prepared for burial. That was a very important custom. Perhaps Mary had the oil for the purpose of anointing Jesus' dead body, itself an act of love. But in the opportunity she had to be in his presence, she realized that it might be now or never. So, rather than waiting for Jesus to die and then to pour the oil on his body, not knowing if she would even have that opportunity, she poured the oil on Jesus in person, alive, as he visited in her own home.

It was timely service, demonstrating love to Jesus while he was still alive. In Mark 14, Jesus says,

Mark 14:8 "She has done what she could. She has come beforehand to anoint My body for burial."

Because of this, because of the impending death and burial of Jesus, this anointing is seen to be appropriate and proper. This was not an ordinary occasion, but a unique situation. Jesus was about to lay down his life. He was about to die, and for three days, his body would remain in the grave. And so to mark that distinct occasion, an anointing was called for. This was not an ordinary duty, but a final duty. Her last duty, her last act of worship and service.

And, according to Calvin, there was a spiritual significance to it, for the anointing of bodies was not an empty rite but a symbol of the hope of resurrection. It was a very timely act of love, one which God brought about in his own providence to proclaim the impending death and promised resurrection of Jesus Christ!

Jesus also silences the foolish hypocrisy of Judas, not by rebuking him for being a thief, but by declaring,

## **B. Proper priorities.**

v.8

There are ordinary events and special events, and this anointing falls in the category of special. This was not a sacrament that Jesus institutes for the on-going life of the church to practice, as he did with the Lord's Supper and Baptism. This is a unique act specific to unique circumstances.

Jesus speaks of the on-going circumstances when he says, "The poor you have with you always."

Now there is nothing derogatory in that, nothing uncompassionate nor insensitive, though people today might take it that way. Just a way to say, in ordinary life, there will always be occasions to care for the needs of the poor. And you ought to, as the Scripture does make clear.

But at this point in history, something extraordinary is about to happen. Something that had never happened before, and would never happen again. Something which was at the very heart and center of God's eternal and unchangeable decrees. His eternal purpose, that in the fullness of time, Jesus would lay down his life as the atoning sacrifice for the sins of his people. And this was the fullness of time.

Therefore, the priority is upon Jesus. And it must always be so. There are many things which fall into the normal, ordinary, usual and customary affairs of life. Many good things, things you ought to be doing and things that ought to demand your time and attention.

But then there are things of higher priority. And the worship of

God is that higher priority.

It is good to care for the needs of others! Indeed, it is your calling as a Christian. Beginning with your own family. And certainly including the needs of the poor. But there is a higher priority, and here is where the so-called social gospel has so seriously erred. The highest priority is not merely social ministry to people in need. The church ought to be involved in such things, but not as their primary focus.

The worship of God is the primary focus, made so obvious by Jesus' words. You always have opportunity to care for the poor. You do not always have immediate opportunity to worship me.

So Jesus says, when you have opportunity to worship me, take advantage of it!

For Mary, that meant displaying the devotion of her love in a physical tangible way, anointing the physical body of Jesus while he still lived. For us, who now worship in spirit and in truth, that means that our worship is to be our priority. And there are occasions, particularly in the freedom of the sabbath day, to put aside the ordinary responsibilities of life in order to delight in the Lord. And that is really the intent and design of the sabbath day, to set aside time each week to have the opportunity to demonstrate proper priorities, following Mary's example. To set aside the ordinary, for that which is sacred.

Even in human relationships, extraordinary occasions are very useful, occasions like birthdays and anniversaries, or even displays of affection that are chosen spontaneously. Something beyond the ordinary existence of life. That's why that gift of roses on Valentines Day is so meaningful to many wives. The extravagance which reflects the devotion of your heart ought to

be the value of any gift that you give. How much more so in our relationship with God.

So we are right back where we started. Extravagant devotion. Humble service. Unmeasured and unrestrained acts of love.

You aren't called today to buy an expensive bottle of perfume and pour it out upon an altar as an act of worship. But you are called to do precisely what Mary did. That is, in the words of Paul,

Rom. 12:1 "...that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service."

Your highest priority is simply this, to demonstrate and express that you do, indeed, love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength.