

LOVE WITHOUT LIMITS

BY DR. JERRY VINES

By the Book™ A Chapter by
Chapter Bible Study Series
from **Jerry Vines Ministries**
2295 Towne Lake Parkway
Suite 116 #249
Woodstock, GA 30189

Let's Begin

In our last study, we found our Lord demonstrating His love to a family toward whom He had become attached—the Lazarus household. Through staying at their home on various occasions the Lord Jesus, no doubt, experienced a special relationship with them, an obvious exception to the life and ministry of the One Isaiah rightly prophesied would hold “no beauty that we should desire him. He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and we hid as it were our faces from him; he was despised, and we esteemed him not” (53:2-3).

Chapter 12 now takes us with Jesus back to the little village we've come to know as Bethany. When we were there last, the main character in death's drama was Lazarus. Now, however, John focuses on Jesus as the main character facing death. For Lazarus, death was but the miserable decay of a world condemned by sin and suffering. But our Lord's death can only be viewed as the marvelous demonstration of a loving Father-God Who desires the complete destruction of sin and suffering. In less than a few week's time, Jesus would hang on a Roman cross.

As we follow John through chapter 12, we will use this simple outline to guide our journey:

I. The Full Scope of Our Love (vv.1-26)

II. The Full Sacrifice of His Love (vv. 27-50)

I. The Full Scope of Our Love (vv. 1-26)

Recalling momentarily the Lazarus household, whom we met in chapter 11, it's easy to gather from each of the household members the full scope of the Christian's life. For example, from Martha we may draw the image of *work*, the perfect picture of a Christian's life of service to God. Martha is best seen in the gospels as one ever busy. That Martha is a servant, there stands no doubt (v. 2; cp. Luke 10:4).

Next, we may consider Lazarus, Martha's brother and the one Christ raised from the dead. He stands as a unique picture of *witness* to the gospel power, sharing his run in with death.

We hear of many today who have what is called “near death” experiences. Whether or not these are real or imaginary, Lazarus experienced much more than a near death experience. Lazarus had been dead and buried four days when Jesus got to town! Jesus' power over death became a catalyst for many people to come to Christ because of Lazarus' witness (vv. 9-10). The effectiveness Lazarus experienced in sharing about Jesus cannot be overlooked (v. 11).

Finally, we may draw from Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus, the desirable image of *worship*. Why? So often, we find Mary at the feet of Jesus (v. 3). Thus, these three spheres—*work*, *witness*, *worship*—serve as the full scope of the Christian's life. Being the full scope of the Christian's life, it is not too much to suggest that these same three spheres serve as the full scope of the Christian's love. We demonstrate our love to God through our service for Him (work), our sharing of Him (witness), and our surrender to Him (worship).

Twisting the screws down a little bit tighter, let's focus particularly on Mary and the specific demonstration she makes in proving her love. Before this section ends, we'll also note some seekers who would know more about this Jesus toward Whom Mary offers her allegiance. Note, then, the *adoration* Mary offered (v. 3).

Gathered around the table with friends once again, Jesus sits at

Reflection Connection

Three spheres can be said to make up the full scope of the Christian's life—work, witness, worship. Which one most aptly describes you? Are there some ways you may improve on the other two spheres that may not be your “strong suit”?



an evening meal. Mary approaches the Lord with a box of expensive perfume, pours it on His feet, wiping them with her hair. Twice Jesus was anointed by a woman. On one occasion, the act pictured the *confession of a sinner* (Luke 7:38). Mary offered her anointing to picture the *consecration of a saint*.

The act was not one void of sacrifice. The perfume Mary offered was very costly. In fact, it would take an average man approximately two years of his entire wages to pay for such. Imagine it! Yet, John gives us no hint whatsoever that Mary was reluctant to give such an extraordinary gift. How often is it when we hear of massive sums given to God's church that we feel they must be published.

I read where a school was left a large sum of money from an estate following the death of one of its graduates. I could not help but wonder if the same public display of gratitude by the school's administrators would have been forthcoming had it been a widow passing away leaving a sacrificial but very meager sum to the school because she was not a woman of wealth. Nothing is too costly to give to Jesus! But also, nothing is too meager to give to Jesus if meagerness is what you possess!

Remember that Jesus looks at the heart and therefore, the question is, did I give my best? (cp. 2 Samuel 24:24). Love always gives its best. Mary was actually saving this perfume for this particular occasion. She wanted with all her heart to offer her best: "Then said Jesus, Let her alone: against the day of my burying hath she kept this" (v. 7).

Nothing is too costly to give to Jesus!

Thus, we see Mary's act of adoration was costly. We also must note her act was lowly. Mary's adoration and worship was what Scripture terms humility. According to Psalm 23, anointing a person's head was an act of honor (v. 5). Kings, for example, had anointing oil poured over their heads. However, Mary did not feel worthy to approach Jesus and anoint Him as King. Instead, she takes her hair and wipes His feet, an explicit indication of her humble soul.

Further proof of her humility is the fact that her hair, which represented her glory (1 Corinthians 11:15), was to be bound in public, according to the custom of the day. Her love and adoration for Jesus made her lose her fear of what others might think; she cared only for lifting up the Lord Jesus Christ.

That being the case, her adoration was not only a costly act and a lowly act, it was also a lovely act. The fragrance of her deed filled the house with love's unmistakable scent. It wasn't done for others; it was only done for Jesus. Yet, those things we do for Jesus-sacrificially, costly, and humbly-inevitably brings bountiful blessings on everybody else!

In other words, when we offer adoration to our Lord Jesus, the fragrance of it will reach all in the house. I'm reminded of what the Apostle Paul wrote: "For we are unto God a sweet savour [i.e., fragrance] of Christ, in them that are saved, and in them that perish;" (2 Corinthians 2:15).

Before leaving Mary's adoration, we may see more clearly John's point concerning Mary if we contrast her *adoration* with Judas' *attitude* (vv. 4-6). There is an old saying: "Where the rose grows, also grows the thorn." In Judas' attitude, no

Reflection Connection

Do you make it a practice to offer your best to God? Explain. What are some every-day things you do which demonstrate ways to offer your best to God? Be prepared to share with the group and allow time for others to share.

Reflection Connection

Reflect on Mary's sacrificial act for a few moments. What are some examples from today that are comparable to Mary's costly act? How may we balance our gifts of sacrifice with stewardship campaigns in our churches? Perhaps the Pastor can help you formulate some ways to do so.



better contrast with Mary's adoration could be imagined: "Why was not this ointment sold for three hundred pence, and given to the poor?" (v. 5). Nor are we left to speculate exactly what was present in Judas' words. For John immediately tells us, "This he said, not that he cared for the poor; but because he was a thief, and had the bag, and bare what was put therein" (v. 6).

When the first words out of a person's mouth-after such an obvious, sacrificial act as was Mary's-is criticism, this surely reveals something twisted is at work. The world always looks for the fly in the ointment, so to speak. Jesus experienced more criticism than you or I could ever imagine. His motives were attacked; His words were misrepresented; and His actions were ridiculed. This is the spirit of Judas.

"Sir, we would see Jesus."

Judas was not only critical, he was also cold-hearted. Matthew records Judas' description of Mary's act in all its bluster: *Judas considered Mary's act a waste* (Matthew 26:8). But this was not all. Judas' attitude contrasts with Mary's adoration because Judas was covetous: "This he said, not that he cared for the poor; but because he was a thief..." (v. 6). Putting on a pretense of caring for the poor, he only had his eyes on the purse. A covetous person will eventually lose all that life really means. That was the story of Judas.

In Mary, we observe love demonstrated in its full intensity toward Jesus. No wonder we so often find in John's gospel others coming to Jesus. Beginning in v. 20, at the impending close of Jesus' ministry, John records a group of Greeks seeking out the Lord: "And there were certain Greeks among them that came up to worship at the feast: The same came therefore to Philip, which was of Bethsaida of Galilee, and desired him, saying, Sir, we would see Jesus" (vv. 20-21).

In Mary, we saw love *shown*; in the Greeks, we see love *sought*. They come to Jesus requesting to see Him. John intends us to note their dissatisfaction, their disillusionment, and their desperation. Neither their Greek philosophy nor their numerous religions nor their highly publicized wisdom satisfied their hunger for genuine love within. What they sought, they believed Jesus could give: "Sir, we would see Jesus."

The magnetism Jesus possesses is unmatched. Sometimes the church just needs to get out of the way and let people see Jesus. We focus too often on the "right style" of music that attracts people or the "right kind" of atmosphere to make people feel comfortable or the "right kind" of message to meet their "felt needs." While none of these things are bad, neither do any of them satisfy what people are really looking for deep, down inside: "Sir, we would see Jesus." Mary had it; Judas did not. The Greeks wanted what Mary had. Do we?

II. The Full Sacrifice of His Love (vv. 27-50)

When the Greeks came requesting to see Jesus, He spoke to them of the necessity and anguish of the cross. In these verses we hear the last words of His public ministry. Think about that: what would you say if you knew it was the last time you'd be speaking?

Reflection Connection

What are some of the main things people seem to search for today? Do you think they search for it from Jesus? Why or why not? Are there some ways we may create a thirst in people's hearts? Explain.



Reflection Connection

Think for a moment about standing before a crowd with one sure fact in mind: this is the last public thing you'll say. What would you address? How would you address it?

Reflection Connection

The cross is about condemnation. Why is condemnation such a positive characteristic? Explain.

Reflection Connection

How does death become a motivating factor in drawing people to Jesus? Explain. When we think of death, we think usually of defeat or decay. Why is death associated with exaltation? Be prepared to openly share on this in the group time.

The Apostle Paul wrote: "God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross..." (Galatians 6:14). The cross stands, without a single doubt, the single greatest expression of sacrificial love our God gives. There are three specific characteristics of the cross about which Jesus speaks to the seeking Greeks. Let's note each of them.

First, the cross is about *condemnation*. Jesus says: "Now is the judgment of this world: now shall the prince of this world be cast out" (v. 31). By the cross, the world is denounced. Jesus specifically mentions "this world"-that is, the spirit of human society. Everything that leads a man away from God is included in "this world." Many times we hold on for dear life to this world, not even realizing that we are not so much holding on to it as it is holding on to us. (Galatians 1:4). If you think this is not so, try letting go of the world! The cross is that by which we overcome and become different from the world. Jesus later affirms to us: "Be of good cheer; I have overcome the world" (16:33; cp. 1 John 2:15-16).

In addition, the world is not only denounced, but the devil is also dethroned: "The prince of this world be cast out." The prince is none other than Satan himself (cp. 14:30; 16:11). At the cross, Jesus tore the veil away and exposed the prince of darkness (Luke 22:53; cp. Ephesians 2:2; Colossians 2:15).

Second, the cross is about *exaltation*: "And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me" (v. 32). Jesus is the centerpiece of the gospel or, better still, the center-*Person* of the gospel. He is personally lifted up. Nor is it mysterious on what the Son of Man is lifted-*The cross!* Still more clear is the purpose of the cross upon which Jesus would show the full sacrifice of His love: "While ye have light, believe in the light, that ye may be the children of light..." (v. 36). Jesus is the sole object of the Christian's faith. We are to "believe in the light" (cp. 3:14).

Even more, through the exaltation of Jesus, God dealt sin a mortal blow through the cross. The Apostle Paul makes this strikingly clear: "For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him" (2 Corinthians 5:21). By becoming sin's penalty for us, Christ mooted sin's condemnation to everyone who believes on Him. He literally brought victory out of defeat and translated us into new Kingdom life with the Lord Jesus reigning supreme: "Who hath delivered us from the power of darkness, and hath translated us into the kingdom of his dear Son" (Colossians 1:13).

Third, the cross is about *captivation*. Note our Lord's words carefully: "And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me" (v. 32). The cross has always had a gripping way it captivated men and women. Several reasons present themselves: first, the cross had a *duel-nature* of it. In the gospel, Christ and the cross are always linked. It is not Jesus alone or the cross alone. Instead it is the *cross of Jesus Christ*.

Another reason the cross is like a gigantic magnet drawing people to itself is the *daring-nature* of it. In other words, the cross was risky. Who would ever have dreamed of the cross as a way to save people? That's why the greatest minds of the Greek philosophers counted such a method as sheer foolishness. That's also why the most religious people on earth at the time of Jesus-the Pharisees-counted the cross a stumbling block.



Reflection Connection

Think back concerning when you were first attracted to the Christian faith. What do you remember that seemed so overwhelmingly attractive to you? Allow others in the group to share similar stories.

Did you ever stop to wonder why we admire anyone who dares to do something adventurous? That sense of *daring* is intrinsic to the cross. Such *daring* captures men's hearts. If one is looking for one who dared to be different, who dared to give it all, who dared to sacrifice everything, one needs look no further than Jesus and the cross. The Greeks who came searching stopped at the cross. Nothing else quenched their thirst. Nothing they'd found satisfied that longing within their hearts: "Sir, we would see Jesus."

Finally, a third reason the cross draws people to it is because of its *devotion*. The cross draws by the sheer power of its love (cp. Jeremiah 31:3; Song of Solomon 1:2-4; Hosea 11:4). It was not nails that held Jesus to the cross. It was not the guards that forced Him to be there. It was not the Pharisees who demanded He stay on the cross. The only thing that held Jesus to the cross was the full scope of His sacrificial love. His love is the basis of His claim upon us. And it is that love that draws us. It is that love that keeps us.

Golden Greek Nugget

Jesus said when He was lifted up, He would "draw" all men to Himself (v. 32). There are different words in the Greek text, all translated by the English word "draw." One particular word for "draw" mean essentially to "drag by force." For example, when Paul got into trouble in Lystra for preaching, after he was beaten, they "drew him out of the city" (Acts 14:19). In John 12:32, however, the term "draw" means "to draw by a compelling, inward force." In other words, the cross is like a gigantic magnet, pulling people to Jesus (cp. 6:44).

Wrap Up

We are taught in John 12 about the full scope of the believer's love, most vividly seen in the life of Mary. Her worshipful devotion is example to us all. Even so, no amount of our love could bring us to the Father or reconcile us to God. Only the full scope of His love could do that. The cross is the highest expression of that love. He died to give us life; He sacrificed to forgive our sin and reconcile us to God. The full scope of His love, dying on a cross is what makes the difference for eternity.

