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Glorious or Useful?

John 12:1-8

Prayer: *Father, we just again thank you for your grace, we thank you for this day. This is a special day that we set aside to focus on you and the cross. And Father, we pray especially this day that your Holy Spirit would be here accompanying us and giving us the ability to open your word and to learn anew just what it is you have done for us in the gift that you've given us of that cross. And we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.*

As I said, this is the first Sunday of the month, this is the Sunday that we remember Jesus and his cross, and Jesus on the night before he died, he met with his disciples and there for the very last time, he celebrated a Passover supper that we see spoken of in Matthew 26. It says this: *Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is my body." And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, "Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you I will not*

drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom." So Jesus took bread and he took wine and he offered them up as symbols of his flesh and of his blood and then he asked his disciples to eat the bread and drink the cup in order to symbolically eat his flesh and drink his blood. Then he asked them to remember this on a regular basis, this particular sacrifice, and this is what we do when we call -- and we call it the Lord's table. And we celebrate it once a month and we do that by meditating on what it is the Lord Jesus Christ has done for us on the cross, by examining ourselves, by asking God's Holy Spirit to point out areas in our own lives where he's convicting us of sin, by confessing our sins, and then by participating in the elements. In *John 6:53* it says this: *So Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you."*

Well, as most of you know, we've been following the life of Christ, we've been working our way through the Gospel of John and we're at this point at the 12th chapter. Jesus has just raised Lazarus, and he's enjoying a dinner. There's a celebratory dinner that is taking place celebrating the good news of this event and this is in *John 12*, it says this, *John 12:1*: *Six days before the Passover, Jesus therefore came to Bethany, where Lazarus was, whom Jesus had*

raised from the dead. So they gave a dinner for him there. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those reclining with him at table. So Jesus is the guest of honor, Lazarus is there and he's there also as proof of the fact that Jesus was an incredibly close friend of his, Jesus loved him, Jesus came and Jesus raised him, and so it was symbolic not just of the fact that they were friends but they were together but that his being there was a testimony to the power of Jesus Christ. We pick up at verse 3, it says: *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. 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?"* Well, on the surface it really does look like Judas may have a point because three hundred denarii was an enormous amount of money. We know that because a few chapters back Jesus is challenging his disciples who have been around this enormous crowd of people and Jesus is asking them to feed them, and in *John 6:7* Philip is remarking on the enormity of the task, and he says: *"Two hundred denarii would not be enough to buy bread for each of them to get a little."* So we know it's a big amount. Three hundred denarii, it's about a year's wages for a common laborer. So Mary is clearly being extravagant here and Judas is attempting to call her out for it. And John is writing looking

back at Judas who has since revealed himself as the ultimate traitor and we also find out that he's revealed himself to be an embezzler. John says this in verse 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. 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."*

Well, my point is this this morning, is that Judas had inadvertently stumbled into one of the greatest threats to the gospel there is. And he didn't just stumble into it, in fact he embraced it whole-heartedly. You see, Mary's extravagant act had forced Judas to create a dichotomy between his phony love for God's creation and a love of God's glory itself. You see, Jesus loved both, but he loved them exactly the way God intended them to be loved. If we look at the very end of Jesus's ministry on earth, we can see that we see in him stating what his goal was in his high priestly prayer, and it wasn't to feed the hungry, clothe the naked or heal the sick, although all of those were absolutely vital parts of what his goal was, but the ultimate goal was this, this is what he said in *John 17*, he said: *"I have glorified You on the earth. I have finished the work which You have given Me to do."* You see, Jesus's priority was first and foremost the glory of God. And you

know, pursuing God's glory inevitably leads to feeding the hungry, clothing the naked and healing the sick. But Jesus understood the critical nature of putting first things first. And he also understood that Judas was trying to place the love of God's creation over love for God himself. Jesus' response to Judas might seem offensive at first and it seems almost cavalier. In verse 8 he says: *"For the poor you always have with you, but you do not always have me."* Actually Jesus was making an incredibly important point when it comes to the gospel. And what he's saying is that it is the glory of God which must drive the gospel and not just the love for God's creation. You know, it's often said that the good is the enemy of the best, and this is really a perfect example of that, because the good in this case is what Judas is falsely insisting on. He demands to feed the poor who he cared nothing at all about, versus the best which is extravagantly glorifying Christ as Mary did. And when Jesus said: *"Leave her alone, so that she may keep it for the day of my burial,"* he was making it clear that Mary had made the right choice. You see, Judas was attempting to put the cart before the horse. And when it comes to the gospel, it is critical that we understand that the primary difference -- that there exists a primary difference between the horse and the cart, and it's a difference between the gospel of utility and the gospel of glory, and glory must always take the lead. You see, it's a choice, it's either presenting the gospel as a means of advancing a

cause no matter how good that cause might be or advancing the gospel because it glorifies God. Judas tried to force that issue by pitting Mary's act against feeding the poor. Thankfully Jesus wouldn't have it, and here's why. You see, when your primary goal is the glory of God, you will always find yourself honoring him by loving his creation. If your primary goal is loving his creation, you can find yourself pitting the very same love of his creation against his glory, and that's exactly what Judas was attempting to do. As he says in verse 5: *"Why was this ointment not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?"*

Well, you know, the devil couldn't have said it any better than Judas did. You know, we are up against a very clever foe who is quite willing to take our love for God's creation and twist it to his own end. Now, you have to understand that Satan is the god of this world. He runs the show here in a manner of speaking. And Jesus made that clear just before he went to the cross speaking of Satan, he said this in *John 12:31*, he said: *"Now is the judgment of this world; now will the ruler of this world" -- Satan -- "be cast out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself."* So Jesus identifies Satan as the ruler of this world. God in *2 Corinthians 4:4* warns us about Satan's ability to blind us specifically when it comes to the idea of the glory of Christ. He says this, he says: *The god of this world has blinded*

the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. You see, the god of this world knows exactly what he is doing, and his goal is to take our minds off God's glory by focusing them on God's creation, and he delights in using the good, that is people's love for God's creation, to obscure and overwhelm the best, which is the glory of God.

You know, I often use the story of how dangerous any gospel that is not rooted in God's glory truly is by describing a ministry that started out with a very lofty but very dangerous goal of loving God's creation, loving God's people, instead of his glory. This organization started in the 1850s in the United States and it started by emulating a ministry that had sprung up in England started by George Williams. And to quote the organization's history, the ministry in London that they were emulating started as "A refuge of Bible study and prayer for young men seeking escape from the hazards of life on the streets." The American version did the same thing but it started out reaching out first to sailors, and soon it broadened its appeal and it started to reach out to anybody coming into the city from a rural area, offering them protection, Bible study, prayer, and a heart for evangelism. And over the years the goal became more and more outreach-oriented instead of glory-oriented. And as the numbers grew larger and

larger, inevitably what happens is the sharper aspects of the gospel, the aspects of God's holiness, God's judgment, those sharper aspects began to be dulled down or just ignored, they certainly grew less and less popular as they always will when God's glory is not first and foremost. Before long they experienced enormous growth. They opened up their first summer campground in 1885. In 1891 they organized the very first basketball game by hanging peach baskets and throwing a ball into it. And as the organization grew larger and larger, the goal was to reach more and more people, which is a good thing. It's not a bad thing. It's a good thing and it demonstrated a love for God's creation. But it's not the best thing. And great strides were made in helping young men get established in business, get established in the city, get safe and get their lives in order, but one of the things that stood more and more in the way of that goal in subtle ways at first was the gospel. And so the gospel began to be changed to accommodate the goal of reaching the maximum amount of people. The hard edges of who God was began to be replaced with good morals, good company, and healthy living. Swimming became a part of the organization's identity and over time that identity grew as the gospel began to diminish. The four gospels gradually got replaced with four core values: caring, honesty, respect, and responsibility. They're all good things. Wonderful things. But they're not the best things. It took more than a century but the changes were devastating to the

gospel. And today the organization has formally changed its name. It used to be known as the YMCA, the Young Men's Christian Association, now it's simply the Y. And the reason why it's simply Y is that they no longer want the encumbrance, the encroachment or the embarrassment that the word "Christian" implies. We look at them and we see what happens when the utility gospel completely overwhelms the gospel of glory. Today in many Y camps you're not allowed to pray in Christ's name. It's too exclusive, it's too narrow, it's too limiting to the goal of loving God's creation. And there's wonderful people who still work in the Y. But you have to understand, there's a far, far more clever enemy who is guiding where that organization went. And so instead of praying to Christ, today prayers are often lifted up to the sun or the moon or to nature itself. And we look at this and we see, well, Judas's goal has finally been reached. The ointment has been sold, the poor have been served, and the gospel is gone. Instead of glorifying Christ, all of that energy has now been put to much better use, or so the organization thinks. You know, it only took the devil a little more than a century to turn this organization literally upside down. And so it is with churches. And so it is with all Christian organizations when they lose sight of the glory of God. They don't embrace bad things, instead they elevate the good things to the place that only the best thing deserves to be in, and that's the glory of God.

And the social gospel does the very same thing. It is the gospel gloried down from the worship of Christ to the worship of his creation. And yet the gospel properly understood as the horse of God's glory at the head of the cart of his creation, well that provides all of the reason we should need to care about what Judas pretended to care about. He said, "*Why was this ointment not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?*" Well, helping the poor, the sick, and the needy including care for the environment, they all come under the heading of seeking to glorify God, and when that becomes our number one priority, then those expressions of the glory of God will naturally follow. You see, Mary did the right thing because she put first things first.

As the elders come forward to distribute the cup, I'd like us to consider this morning what our first priority really is. Is it glory, or is it utility? And as they distribute the elements, consider also this warning that God gives concerning communion itself. This is from *1 Corinthians 11:28-32*. God says this: *But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For he who eats and drinks in an unworthy manner eats and drinks judgment to himself, not discerning the Lord's body. For this reason many are weak and sick among you, and many sleep. For if we would judge ourselves, we would not be judged. But when we are judged, we are chastened by the Lord, that we may*

not be condemned with the world. You know, I say this each month, I say communion is extremely serious business, and to enter into it unworthily is to literally court disaster. And so I ask, I beg of you, if you are not confident that you are a child of the King, or perhaps if you first need to be reconciled to your brother before you leave your gift at the altar, then just pass the elements on and do not participate. And nobody's going to look at you strangely, nobody's going to think you're odd. Instead as I've often said, they'll think you wise. But I also want us to understand that there's the other side of this that you can make a mistake on this as well and that's thinking unless I'm spotlessly perfect, I'm not worthy to receive communion, and that, too, is a mistake as well. You see, being a child of the King doesn't mean that we don't sin and that we never fail. What it means is that salvation is a gift that no one is capable of earning. No one is capable of being good enough for heaven. As Dane Ortland puts it: "In the kingdom of God, the one thing that qualifies you is knowing that you don't qualify, and the one thing that disqualifies you is thinking that you do." It also means that when we fail we're aware that we have sinned because God has put his Holy Spirit within us convicting us of sin, and so we grieve, we grieve as children who know we have a Father who wants to forgive us and cleanse us.

God says in *1 John 1:9*: *If we confess our sins, he is faithful and*

just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. So being a child of the King does not mean that we are without sin. It means that when we sin we understand we have an advocate, we have someone who speaks on our behalf in heaven before the Father. *1 John 2:1 says: My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have an advocate with the Father -- Jesus Christ, the Righteous One.* So because we have Jesus's righteousness and not our own, we are free to eat from his table. And so if you love your Lord, don't deny yourself the privilege that Christ has purchased for you with his blood. He lived the life that we were supposed to live and then he died the death we all deserved to die in our place so that we could be made worthy of heaven. So take a moment now as we sit and contemplate, and ask yourself: Do I cherish the glory of God?

1 Corinthians the 11th chapter, the 23rd verse says this: For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, "This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." Take, and eat.

I want to go back to our scripture this morning from John 12. It says this, *John 12 starting at verse 4: 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 is 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. 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."

You know, at this point historically Jesus' crucifixion, death, and burial are literally only days away and only Jesus knew what was the full implication of what Mary herself was doing, only he knew what it would cost him to say to his heavenly Father in *John 17*:
"I have glorified You on the earth. I have finished the work which You have given Me to do. And now, O Father, glorify Me together with Yourself, with the glory which I had with You before the world was." So I wonder if we really understand what glorifying God really entails. You know to glorify God means to make his character and his attributes known. It is to use whatever means that God has given me to reveal to my own world who God is, and what God does, and each of us is called uniquely to this task as the most important task we will be given. You know, Mary knew exactly what her task was, and nothing, nothing could keep her from doing it, including the disapproval of Judas. But not just Judas. In fact it was all of the disciples who disapproved. Mark's gospel

describes the very same incident and it gives us a lot more details as to what took place. Let me just read to you from Mark's gospel. This is Mark 14. It says: *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. But they said, "Not during the feast, lest there be an uproar of the people."* 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.

Well, Mark gives us a lot of different and new details. We learn that the dinner actually took place at the house of Simon who was another person who had been blessed and healed by Jesus and we also learned that Mary's act was far more extravagant than John describes, and Mary having broken her flask starts at Jesus' head, and anoints his whole body winding up at his feet which she wiped with her hair. Verse 4 says: *But there were some who were indignant among themselves, and said, "Why was this fragrant oil wasted? For it might have been sold for more than three hundred denarii and given to the poor."* And they criticized her sharply. You see, Judas wasn't the only one who was upset with Mary's actions. Others were and they were indignant. I don't think Mary much cared what the other ones thought. And even if it meant that

all the disciples and all the guests were upset with her, she was determined to glorify God. And now it can be argued either way, that she didn't realize what it is that she was doing, that she was actually preparing his body for burial or perhaps because Mary was known as one who singularly paid attention and listened intently to Jesus, maybe she was the only one who knew what was coming, and so she was determined to anoint his body ahead of time. We don't know. But we do know this much, we know that this was an incredibly costly thing, we know that it was extravagant and that it flew in the face of practical wisdom that said well, it should have gone to the poor. John tells us that Judas was upset. Matthew tells us the disciples were upset, he says: *But when the disciples saw it, they were indignant, saying, "Why this waste?"* Mark tells us that Jesus was upset as well, but he was upset at the disciples and the guests, and he was delighted in Mary. In *Mark 14:6* it says: *But Jesus said, "Let her alone. Why do you trouble her? She has done a good work for Me. For you have the poor with you always, and whenever you wish you may do them good; but Me you do not have always. She has done what she could. She has come beforehand to anoint My body for burial. 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."*

As the elders begin distributing the cup, I want us to consider

what it is that Jesus is telling us. I mean Jesus knew that he was about to offer up his perfect life as a substitute for our lives of sin. He knew that the horror of coming for his perfect Father bearing the filth of our sin was about to begin. He was going to glorify his Father by revealing his Father's character. *John 3:16: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life."* Jesus was about to reveal his Father's character and his attributes, his perfect holiness, his perfect justice, his perfect mercy which would all be on display at the cross. But you know, Mary was doing the same thing. Mary was there to glorify Jesus by revealing his character. *John 15: "Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends."* Mary was revealing his character and his attributes as well, his perfect holiness, his justice, his overwhelming mercy, all about to also be on display at the cross as well. And Jesus said of her action: *"Wherever this gospel is preached in the whole world, what this woman has done will also be told as a memorial to her."* We are fulfilling Jesus's words right now. You see, Jesus delighted in Mary because she delighted in glorifying him, and she didn't much care about the cost. John Piper says it well when he says this: *"The deepest reasons why we Christians live for the glory of God is because God lives for the glory of God. We are passionate about God's glory because God is passionate about God's glory."* And so

as the cup is being distributed, I would ask, are you passionate for the glory of God, so much so that you would risk rejection and anger particularly among those closest to you? I mean, we know Mary broke all of the rules, rules of propriety, rules of finance, rules of common sense and yet we also know that God delighted in her extravagance. See, Mary understood that the horse is God's glory, the cart is the love that we have for his created world, and it's only when the horse is ahead of the cart that the real gospel advances, because it always advances by God's grace and not by man's efficiency.

A few weeks back, there was a news article about Samaritan's Purse going to Liberia to rescue Dr. Kent Brantley stricken with Ebola, and they spent \$2 million in that effort, and they were roundly criticized by some Christian conservatives, one of whom said this: "Whatever good Dr. Kent Brantley did in Liberia has now been overwhelmed by the more than \$2 million already paid by the Christian charities Samaritan's Purse and SIM USA just to fly him and his nurse home in separate Gulfstream jets, specially equipped with medical tents, and to care for them at one of America's premiere hospitals." The critic was incensed. Yet it was Kent Brantley who said, "I prayed that God would help me be faithful even in my illness and that in my life, even in my death, He would be glorified." See, Kent Brantley was a physician sent to Liberia

because he loved Christ. He was a physician laboring among those who were suffering from Ebola and he caught Ebola and yet he was willing to spend his life extravagantly in order to glorify God. Samaritan's Purse was also willing to extravagantly rescue him for the exact same reason: in order to glorify God. Now you can argue that neither action was prudent, neither action was cost efficient, and that both actions actually denied resources that could have been used more efficiently elsewhere, and that's the argument that's being made, but it should sound familiar. It's the same argument that was made 2,000 years earlier by Judas, and it's as wrong today as it was when Judas made it 2,000 years ago. You see, extravagance in pursuit of God's glory is never foolhardy; it is always fitting, because he deserves nothing less than extravagance from all of us. And so my question this morning is are you and I extravagant when it comes to the glory of God, because it's the most appropriate extravagance there could ever be, because glory is what God is all about. So this morning I would like us to take a moment to thank him extravagantly for his word, for his flesh, and for his blood shed for us. Just take a moment.

1 Corinthians 11:25 says this: In the same manner he also took the cup after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. This do, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me."

So take, and drink.

Well, this is the time where we -- I call it heart, head, and feet, where we try to have some kind of practical understanding, practical application of what we've been talking about this morning. So I want to talk a little bit about extravagance. I want to ask, have you ever given or received an extravagance? I know I have. I can detail years and years ago when we were in the most desperate state we've ever been in, our two boys were in the hospital in intensive care in the neonatal unit, we were desperately short of money, and somebody very specifically said you must come up with a thousand dollars by this date or else. And I remember and I've said this story many, many times, going out to the mailbox in desperate need and opening up that mailbox, there in the mailbox is a letter with a check in it for a thousand dollars. Now that check came from somebody who had no real means of providing a thousand dollars. He had just been fired from his job. I called him and spoke to him, I wanted to know how this all came about, and he said that God had specifically spoken to him about this extravagance. I've mention this before, it's the septic tank story. I was on the phone with -- with -- his name was Peter Borromeo and I was on the phone with him and I said to him, "Peter, this is an astounding amount, it's exactly the amount that we desperately needed." Peter said that -- that he was awoken from a dead sleep and God told him to write me a check, and he said okay.

And he started to sit down to write the check, the thought of a thousand dollars which was an enormous extravagance to him, said just flooded his mind, and he said to me, said, "Hey, I love you, brother, but I don't love you a thousand bucks." But God made that very clear to him, it was to be extravagant. I was just talking to somebody just the other day, a missionary, and he was saying how we were talking about how God works in these mysterious ways, and he was saying that they got a check from somebody who they had run into at an airport. They were just sitting around the airport waiting for a plane, and as often times you just chat and they said we have some cute kids and they were chatting and we chatted, and hadn't heard from them at all, and he said months and months later they got a check in the mail for \$15,000 from a couple they just bumped into in the airport. That was extravagant. But for him and for me, that was life changing. I mean, I told him, I said, you know, for the rest of my life when things got really dicey and really difficult, I could go back and say God, you took care of me. You extravagantly moved in the lives of somebody else and it was hard for that other person to do that, but it changed my life. And I said to this person, I said, you know, for years now you will look back -- and things are going to get dicey again, trust me, but you'll look back at that extravagance, and you'll see the hand of God, and that will make a difference. And so what I would encourage you to do is to be extravagant. And that doesn't mean

huge amounts of money. It just means to whatever you're used to, just be open to God saying that person has a need, be extravagant, be willing to let God use you. You can change the course of somebody's life just like Mary did by being willing to be extravagant. Let's pray.

Father God, I do thank you for Mary, I thank you for her attitude, she didn't care what the disciples thought, she didn't care what Judas thought, she just had a mission to accomplish and it was extraordinarily extravagant, what she did, and you delighted in it. Father, give us a desire to be extravagant with our time, with our money, with our resources when you tell us. Give us the ability to honor you and to bring you glory, we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.