

G R A C E

Reformed Baptist Church

Soli ♦ Deo ♦ Gloria

THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

Sermon Notes

Mary Anoints Jesus

John 12:1-11

January 8, 2006

INTRODUCTION

- All four Gospels contain accounts of a woman anointing Jesus. They are found in the following places:
 - Matthew 26:6-13
 - Mark 14:3-9
 - Luke 7:36-38
 - John 12:1-11

- The account in Luke speaks of the location as “the Pharisee’s house,” and the woman as “a sinner.” Further, the sinful woman weeps and the feet of Jesus and, before she anoints His feet with perfume, “wet His feet with her tears, and kept wiping them with the hair of her head...”
 - Therefore, the Lukan account, it must be concluded, describes an event different from that found in John [and Matthew and Luke as well].

- However, the accounts found in Matthew and Mark closely resemble that found here in John 12.
 - Matthew and Mark [like John] state that the incident occurred in Bethany;
 - They also state that the “perfume” was pure nard;
 - Mark states that the perfume cost [over] three hundred denarii;
 - The reaction of those present, in all three accounts, was that the woman should have sold the nard [perfume] and given the proceeds to the poor.

- Despite the similarities between the accounts in Matthew and Mark, there are some differences.
 - Probably the most significant difference is that in Matthew and Mark, the woman anoints the *head* of Jesus; whereas, in John, the woman anoints His feet.

 - Yet, this difference does not necessarily mean that the account in Matthew and Mark is different from the one in John.

- The first reason is that in Mark and John, it is clear that the woman is using a very large amount of nard. Therefore, it would have been too much to pour over just the head of Jesus [as mentioned in Matthew and Mark].
 - Next, in both Matthew and Mark, Jesus states, “she poured this perfume on My body...to prepare Me for burial.” In other words, although Matthew and Mark focus on the anointing of His head, it seems quite possible that she poured it over His entire body, to include His head **and** His feet.
 - Finally, in Matthew and Mark, the writers are presenting Jesus Christ as the anointed Davidic Messiah. Therefore, it would only be consistent that they mention His *head* being anointed, even though it was His entire body that the woman actually anointed. Given the purpose of their Gospels, it would not have been necessary for Matthew and Mark to mention the anointing of Jesus’ feet.
- Therefore, one can safely conclude that the account mentioned in Matthew and Mark is the same as the one mentioned in John. The account described in Luke is quite clearly a second, separate incident.

Verse 1

- John states that “six days before the Passover” Jesus “came to Bethany where Lazarus was, whom Jesus had raised from the dead.”
- There are several significant points in this first verse:
 - First of all, John, possibly more than any other Gospel writer, presents Jesus Christ as the fulfillment of the Jewish Feasts. As the “lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world,” Jesus is the final Passover Lamb.
 - Secondly, John says that it was “six days before Passover.” Therefore, we are now in the final week of the life of Jesus.
 - Given the events listed in the Gospel accounts, Jesus died on Passover – a Friday; however, according to the Jewish reckoning of days, Passover began on Thursday evening at 6:00 p.m. This is why Jesus would have celebrated the Passover meal, the last supper, with His disciples on Thursday evening [Remember: the Jewish days go from 6:00 p.m. to 6:00 p.m.]. According to the Jewish timetable, Jesus was crucified on the same day as the last supper He shared with His disciples. [NOTE: He was died at 3:00 p.m. Friday – still the same day as Thursday evening after 6:00 p.m.]
 - Therefore, “six days before Passover” refers to the Saturday before Jesus was crucified. However, to the Jew, Saturday begins on Friday evening. So, likely, Jesus arrived on Friday evening, and the meal mentioned here occurred on Saturday afternoon/evening.

- Andreas Kostenberger suggests the following timeline of events during the last week in the life of Jesus:

Jesus Final Week (John 12-19)
March 27 – April 3, A.D. 33

Friday, March 27, 33	Jesus arrives at Bethany	11:55-12:1
Saturday, March 28, 33	Dinner with Lazarus and his sisters	12:2-11
Sunday, March 29, 33	“Triumphal entry” into Jerusalem	12:12-50
Monday – Wednesday, March 30 – April 1, 33	Cursing of fig tree, temple cleansing, temple controversy, Olivet discourse	Synoptics
Thursday, April 2, 33	Third Passover in John; betrayal Arrest of Jesus	13:1 – 18:11
Friday, April 3, 33	Jewish and Roman trials, crucifixion and burial	18:12 – 19:42

- It is certainly significant that John refers to Lazarus as the one “whom Jesus had raised from the dead.” The raising of Lazarus from the dead will serve as one of the primary factors leading to the arrest of Jesus, which will lead to His crucifixion, that is His substitutionary, atoning death as the ultimate Passover Lamb – the perfect, unblemished sacrifice for the salvation of His people.

Verse 2

- John says, “So *they* made Him a supper there...”
 - The “they” could refer to the people of Bethany who were amazed by the miracle [of raising Lazarus from the dead]; or “they” could simply be the people of the particular household.
- This supper or dinner was quite possibly connected with the *Habdalah*, which was the synagogue service that separated the Sabbath day from the rest of the week.
- John also tells the reader that Martha was serving and Lazarus was reclining. It is very possible, then, that this was the home of Lazarus and his sisters, Martha and Mary.
 - The account in Mark 14 states that Simon the Leper owned the home. Therefore, some believe that Simon the Leper was the father of Lazarus, Martha, and Mary; however, it is difficult to make such a conclusion without more evidence.

Verse 3

- This is the central verse of the passage.
- Mary, Lazarus and Martha’s sister, walks over to Jesus and anoints His feet.
 - John states that she “took a pound of very costly perfume of pure nard...”

- The actual weight of the costly perfume was a *litra*. This was a measurement that was most likely equivalent to the Latin *libra*, which was about eleven (11) to twelve (12) ounces (i.e. about three-quarters of a pound).
- The type of perfume was “pure nard”
 - “Nard, also known as spikenard, is a fragrant oil derived from the root and spike (hair stem) of the nard plant, which grows in the mountains of northern India.” (Kostenberger, 360)
 - The Romans were known to use “Indian spike” for anointing the head. This was often described “a rich rose red and very sweetly scented” (W. Walker, 196).
 - Many times nard, because of its high cost, was diluted. However, John tells the reader that this was *pure* nard.
- Mary, then, takes the “pure nard” and anoints the feet of Jesus and wipes His feet with her hair.
 - In this Verse, there are several points that John emphasizes that makes this account so significant:

1. The large amount of perfume [three-quarters of a pound];

- As stated before, in the accounts found in Matthew and Mark, the woman is said to have anointed the *head* of Jesus; however, here, Mary is said to have anointed the feet.
- It seems that, given the large amount of perfume, it would have been too great a quantity for anointed any *one* part of the body of Jesus. Therefore, when Jesus states [in the Synoptics] that the woman anointed His *body*, this should, once again, be taken to mean His entire body, to some degree.
- Calvin believed that the reference, here, to the feet of Jesus meant that the “whole body was anointed down to the feet.”

2. The high value of the perfume [“very costly” – three hundred denarii];

- The perfume was “very costly,” about three hundred denarii.
 - A denarii was a day’s wages.
 - Therefore, because the Jews did not work on Sabbaths or Holy Days, three hundred denarii is equivalent to one year’s salary.
 - Of course, the reason for such a high cost was its quality [*pure* nard] and that it was imported all the way from northern India.
- Either the family of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus was wealthy, or the perfume [nard] was a valuable heirloom.

- Either way, the anointing of Jesus' feet with the nard was a tremendous [financial] sacrifice.

3. Mary's anointing of Jesus' feet [as opposed to, say, his head];

- In First Century Palestine, the feet were considered so unclean that any task involving the feet was reserved for the lowest of slaves.
- Recall John the Baptist's exclamation in John 1:27: "It is He who comes after me, the thong of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie."
- A traditional rabbinical saying goes: "Every service which a slave performs for his master shall a disciple do for his teacher except the loosing of his sandal-thong [strap]."
- Therefore, Mary's act of anointing the *feet* of Jesus was the supreme act of humility.

"This is probably to be taken as an act of utter humility. Mary is taking the lowliest possible place."
 Leon Morris

- James 4:10 states, "Humble yourselves in the presence of the Lord, and he will exalt you."
- Furthermore, when tending to the feet, usually only water was used, not oil or expensive perfume. Also, feet would have rarely, if ever, have been washed *during* a meal.
- Therefore, this truth makes Mary's act all the more unique – even "improper."

4. Mary's use of her hair to wipe the perfume [as opposed to a towel];

- Mary's use of her hair to wipe the feet of Jesus reveals a level of personal intimacy and devotion to our Lord that serves as a powerful testimony to even the modern reader.
- This act further underscores the nature of Mary's humility – not only does she anoint the feet of Jesus...she does so with her hair.
- Furthermore, Jewish women (especially those who were married) never unbound their hair in public. To do so would be considered morally "loose." A "respectable" woman always kept her hair covered.
- Therefore, this act reveals Mary's sincerest desire to humble herself before her Lord *regardless of what other people think*.

Leon Morris writes, "Mary did not stop to calculate public reaction. Her heart went out to her Lord, and she gave expression to her feelings in this beautiful and touching act."

5. The spreading of the fragrance

- Carson notes, "Mention of the fact that the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume suggests not only extravagant love, but suggests that the fragrance of the act will extend far beyond the event itself (Mark 14:9).

- Indeed, John’s statement that “the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume” may simply be his way of stating what Mark did: “Truly I say to you, wherever the gospel is preached in the whole world, what this woman has done will also be spoken of in memory of her.” (Mark 14:9)
- There is a rabbinic statement that goes, “[The scent of] good oil is diffused from the bed-chamber to the dining-hall while a good name is diffused from one end of the world to the other.”
- The Old Testament states that a good name / reputation is better than fine perfume [Ecclesiastes 7:1].
- One scholar noted that a certain “Jewish work relates this verse [Ecclesiastes 7:1] to Abraham: before his call, he was like a flask of perfume sealed with a tight lid lying in a corner; but when God called him, and he obeyed, the reputation of his good works spread, just as when a jar of perfume is opened an the scent fills the air” (*Cant. Rab.* 3.4 on Song 1:3).

Verses 4 – 5

- Immediately, Judas speaks up.
- John states that it is “Judas *Isca*riot, **one of His disciples**, *who was intending to betray Him.*”
- Interestingly, Judas knows **exactly** how much the perfume costs that Mary uses to anoint the feet of Jesus.
- Judas suggests that the woman should have sold the perfume and given the money to the poor. This comments appears rather innocent at first; however, John will reveal Judas’ true motives in the next Verse.
 - Yet, as D.A. Carson remarks, “Judas displays a certain utilitarianism that pits pragmatic compassion, concern for the poor, against extravagant, unqualified devotion. If self-righteous piety sometimes snuffs out genuine compassion, it must also be admitted, with shame, that social activism, even that which meets real needs, sometimes masks a spirit that knows nothing of worship and adoration.”

Verse 6

- Here, John reveals the true motives of Judas: it was not that he was concerned about the poor, “but because he was a thief, and as he had the money box, he used to pilfer what was put into it.”
- Judas was the “treasurer” of the disciples, the one who “had the money box.”
- The money box was most likely the coffer used to provide for the needs of the disciples, as well as the poor.
- Therefore, Judas would have wanted Mary to have sold the perfume, given the proceeds to himself so that he could turn around and steal them – “he used to pilfer what was put into it.”

Verse 7

- Notice, after Judas' rebuke of Mary, Jesus quickly defends her.
- Yet, this is a difficult passage to understand, since it appears, at first glance, to indicate that Mary was going to save some of the perfume for the day of Christ's burial. However, this would not be consistent with the text, as it appears clear that she used all of the perfume to anoint Jesus [see also the parallel passages in Matthew and Mark].
- The original Greek can be translated in several different ways, but most likely, given the context of this passage, the Verse should be translated as follows:

“Leave her alone. [She did not sell the perfume (as Judas suggested)], so that she may keep it for the day of my burial.”

- **To Jesus, it appears rather clear that God had ordained that Mary keep the perfume until this very day...less than one week from His crucifixion...in anticipation of His sacrificial death and subsequent burial.**

No doubt Mary was unaware of the full significance of what she was doing; however, her actions again, underscore the sovereign plan of the Father.

- One scholar writes, “The occasion is symbolically equivalent to the day of burial, and for this reason she was right to keep the ointment and use it in this extravagant way.” [Lindars]
- NOTE: This interpretation makes the most sense when we apply the principle of **INTERPRETING SCRIPTURE WITH SCRIPTURE**, and turn to the parallel passage in Mark 14:8, which reads, “She has done what she could; she has anointed My body beforehand for the burial.”
- However, one of the points that is quite clear is that Jesus' mind is now on the events of the coming week – especially His crucifixion and burial.

Verse 8

- Jesus then refers, likely, to the Old Testament passage found in Deuteronomy 15:11, “There will always be poor people in the land.”
- However, this does NOT mean that the poor are unimportant, it is simply that Christ is insisting that the focus should be on Him, and His coming substitutionary death.
- Interestingly, as well, according to Jewish tradition, care for the dead takes precedent over care for the poor.
- What is also worth noting is that in Mark 14:10-11, it seems that this becomes the impetus for Judas to approach the religious leaders and betray Jesus.

Verses 9 – 11

- When the crowds in Bethany heard that Jesus AND Lazarus were in the home, they came to see them BOTH.

- Both Jesus and Lazarus, it seems rather clear, were like celebrities in this small town.
- Yet, because of this truth, the “chief priests planned to put Lazarus to death also...”
 - “Also” here, of course, means that they were planning kill Lazarus and Jesus.
 - The chief priests were primarily Sadducees, and the Sadducees denied the resurrection of the dead.
 - Therefore, not only was, in their minds, Jesus leading the people “astray,” but Lazarus himself was a walking condemnation of the truth of the doctrine which they denied.
 - NOTE: Is this not the case with every Christian?
 - Finally, think of the problem they had on their hands...they were plotting to kill the very man [Jesus] who had the power to raise the dead and the man who had already been dead!
- Finally, John states, “because on account of him many of the Jews were going away and were believing in Jesus.”
 - This does not necessarily refer to a “saving faith” in Christ. However, it certainly could.
 - If John is stating that the Jews received “saving faith” then he is not asserting that it was ultimately the witness of Lazarus that was “saving” these Jews; but, rather, God was using his witness as the **means** by which to spread the “truth of Jesus Christ.” In other words, they were still men and women saved by grace through faith.