

**John 12: 1-16; “The Fragrance of Christ’s Life”, A Palm Sunday Sermon
delivered by Pastor Paul Rendall on April 17th, 2011,
In the Afternoon Worship Service.**

It is very amazing to me just how unaware the disciples of our Lord were, at this time, of what the Lord Jesus was intending to do, and what He was going to undergo in coming to Jerusalem. He was very deliberately going to the cross and to death for His people. He would finish this good work and would be buried and be raised from the dead in a little more than a week. He came to Bethany six days before the feast of Passover and stayed at Mary and Martha’s place where they made Him a supper where Martha served.

The Supper itself was not held at the house in which Lazarus and his two sisters lived. Rather it was held, we are told in the gospels of Matthew and Mark, in the house of Simon the Leper. This is a little confusing, because a similar incident of a woman pouring oil on Jesus feet is recorded in Luke Chapter 7, verses 36-50. In that passage Jesus was invited to the house of another man named Simon. But he is Simon the Pharisee.

So these are two entirely different incidents of oil pouring. There also seems to be a conflict between Matthew and Mark’s gospels with John’s over the timing of when this supper took place. I believe that the conflict is resolved by saying that Jesus actually did come to Bethany 6 days before the Passover as John records here. The Passover was on Thursday the 14th of Nisan. So counting back you would think that this supper took place the Friday before, on the 8th. Jesus did travel from Jericho to Bethany on Friday the 8th, but He got there toward evening and then began the Sabbath.

So Jesus rested with His friends Mary, Martha, and Lazarus on the Sabbath and then when the Sabbath was over on Saturday evening, then they went to have the supper at Simon the Leper’s house. Then the triumphal entry took place “on the next day” as it says in verse 12 of John 12. This would have been a Sunday. Matthew and Mark’s relating of it makes it seem as though it took place 2 days before the Passover. But in their relation, they do not actually specify the time that this supper took place, and rather seem to be going back in time to say that it did take place while He was in Bethany. They do not specify the day. (See R.C.H Lenski’s treatment of this, on John 12)

But during this supper, in which the 12 Apostles and a few other men reclined at the table, Mary did something which was not at all received well by Judas Iscariot and some of the other disciples. What Mary did that evening will always be remembered, for Jesus said that it would be remembered in Matthew 26: 13. And so it has, and so it will. It says that she took a pound of very costly oil of spikenard, anointed the feet of Jesus, and wiped His feet with her hair and the house was filled with the fragrance of the oil.

This afternoon I want to open up the significance of this act of Mary's which forever will be remembered. For I believe that it touches our lives in relation to our doing service for Jesus today. We want to look first at the act itself. Jesus calls it "a good work done for Him." Secondly, we want to look at the bad reaction to this good work. And then finally we want to look at the commendation that Jesus gave to Mary for this good work in the presence of the disciples gathered there that evening.

1st of all – We want to look more closely at the act itself; the act which is called by Jesus, "a good work done for Him."

Verse 2 of our text says, "There at Bethany they made Him a supper; and Martha served, but Lazarus was one of those who sat at the table with Him." These three people mentioned were Jesus' closest friends outside of His Apostles. Their making Jesus a supper means that they prepared a feast in His honor. Their house may have not been as big as Simon the Leper's house. But Martha didn't mind serving Jesus wherever it would be held.

Verse 3 of our text states that Mary took "a pound of very costly oil of spikenard, and anointed the feet of Jesus, and wiped His feet with her hair." Matthew's gospel says that "a woman came to Him having an alabaster flask of very costly fragrant oil, and she poured it on His head as He sat at the table." Mark's gospel says that, "she came having an alabaster flask of very costly oil of spikenard," and that "she broke the flask and poured it on His head."

Although we can say that there are two separate incidents recorded, of oil being poured on Jesus' feet; one by a woman in Luke 7 and this other one by Mary in John 12; I cannot believe that the incidents recorded in Matthew and Mark and this one in John are separate incidents. They are the same incident, and each gospel has something to contribute in relation to what happened. In the incident in Luke 7, the woman who came to Jesus was very conscious of her sin.

In this passage, Mary was very conscious of her Lord. This was a very planned out and consciously deliberate act on her part to show her love for Jesus as her Savior. It was an act which exhibited her deep appreciation to Him for all that He had taught her, and for all that He had done for her in grace already. She was honoring Him not only for giving her the spiritual truth which led to her salvation, and the many truths related to being His disciple, but she was also honoring Him for the confirming miracle of her brother's being raised from the dead.

She had known of His love and His power before, but in that miracle there was a further revelation of His mission, and ministry, and purpose to save fallen sinners completely from their sin, when He raised her brother from the dead. You will remember that when Lazarus fell sick, that Jesus deliberately waited 2 days longer before coming to them, so that Lazarus would be dead. It could only be after Lazarus died that Jesus could display His great love and power to save completely.

But Mary, of course, didn't know this beforehand. In John 11: 28, Jesus sought her out to talk to her about this issue. Martha told her, "The Teacher is come and is calling for you." "As soon as she heard that, she arose quickly and came to Jesus." In verse 32 it says, "Then, when Mary came where Jesus was, and saw Him, she fell down at His feet, saying to Him, 'Lord, if You had been here my brother would not have died.'" She didn't understand what the Lord Jesus would do that day.

I would say to you that this is the same with us. We do not understand what the Lord Jesus is doing in relation to us on any given day. But the Lord most definitely led her to this point. In verse 40 He says, "Did I not say to you that if you would believe that you would see the glory of God?" And she really did see the glory of God that day in the raising of her brother. In fact, I think that it was that act, which had just taken place a few days before, which made her think about her own faith in relation to Christ's word.

She thought about what Christ had said to her and to the other disciples before in Matthew 16: 21, that "He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised the third day." She now knew in her own heart that this too would come to pass. And that is why she came with this costly oil. She came to this supper bringing to Him the alabaster box. It was her most valuable possession and to pour out its contents upon her Lord because she knew His value.

She had seen His glory, and she now knew that He would pour out His precious life in death. If He had given to her what was most precious, then she would do the same for Him in relation to His upcoming death. She would prepare His body for burial with this oil. She would have no other chance. It was a good work born out of her faith. She broke the flask and poured it out on His head first. Then she took the remainder and poured it out on His feet, and wiped it with her own hair.

And the house was filled with the fragrance. She knew of the preciousness of His life. She knew that He would be poured out in death, and she knew that His life was being poured out as a sacrifice for those whom He loved, and she wanted to honor that life. In this act of hers, she was declaring by faith, to Jesus and to all who were present, that she knew what was shortly to happen to Him when He went up to Jerusalem. He would die there, and she wanted to honor Him for His life.

It was an act which acknowledged and displayed her understanding of Jesus' earthly ministry as a whole; what it had been thus far, and what it would become in His sufferings and death. For Mary, among all of Christ's disciples, saw more clearly than all the rest, that her Lord was deliberately going to going to the cross to die. Whereas most of Christ's Apostles had heard the words of prediction from their Master's mouth, they did not understand what it meant.

In fact when Jesus rode into Jerusalem on the colt the very next day, it says in verse 16, “His disciples did not understand these things at first; but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things were written about Him and that they had done these things to Him.” But I think that Mary knew. I have not known whether to entitle this sermon, “the fragrance of Christ’s death”, or “the fragrance of Christ’s life”, because I believe that Mary saw both. Do you see both today my listening friends?

Do you see the value and the preciousness of Christ pouring Himself out to death so that you might have eternal life? Then what sacrifices ought you to make for Him? What can you render to the Lord for all that He has done for you? Mary would take what was most precious to her, and to break it and pour it out for Christ. She would pour it on His head and acknowledge Him to be her High Priest. Just like Aaron had the oil poured out on his head in Psalm 133.

It says there: “Behold how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!” “It is like the precious oil upon the head, running down on the beard, the beard of Aaron, running down on the edge of his garments.” “It is like the dew of Hermon, descending upon the mountains of Zion; for there the Lord commanded the blessing—Life forevermore.” Mary was united with Jesus in His cause and kingdom.

She was united with Him in His purpose to fulfill all righteousness and for His intent to suffer in order to do so. She was united to Him in His life and His death and His resurrection, by her faith. This oil poured forth on His head and His feet says it all.

Now 2nd – We want to look at the bad reaction to this good work.

(verses 4-6)

“But one of His disciples, Judas Iscariot, Simon’s son, who would betray Him, said, ‘Why was this fragrant oil not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?’” “This he said, not that he cared for the poor, but because he was a thief, and had the money box; and he used to take what was put in it.” “But Jesus said, ‘Let her alone; she has kept this for the day of My burial.’” This reaction of Judas’ really shows the reality of his bad heart. He was always calculating the value of things to the penny in terms of what it might bring to Himself and not to Christ.

Mary would honor Christ with her most precious gift; she would pour it out upon Him, but Judas does not see the value of lavishly honoring His Master. He covers his covetousness with the false zeal of giving the money which could have been derived from the oil’s sale, to the poor. Let us all take care that we value things aright. Bringing honor to Christ is the greatest and finest work that we can do. And if it takes a lavish gift to honor Him, should we then think the cost too great?

No, Mary was right in every way to have done what she did. The fragrance of her offering was being polluted by Judas’ poisonous words. Judas is implying that by Christ’s approving of Mary’s lavish gift, that He is robbing the poor, that this is

a wasted investment; implying that Jesus should not allow it to be spent upon Him. Judas is asserting that Jesus is lavishing this upon Himself, and not giving to charity. All the while, Judas is thinking to himself that this is a waste because he will not see any of the proceeds from it, for even if it was sold, he would not have been given it to the poor entirely. He would have taken a good portion of it. What covetousness and hypocrisy.

Now, we must not simply be disgusted with Judas in his sin of robbing Christ's honor and stealing His resources for ministry, in the name of doing something noble. It was indeed disgusting; the way that he attempted to ruin the beauty of Mary's gift and her actions to honor her Lord. His hypocrisy was truly revealed that day. But we must look to our own hearts and see if there be any wicked way in our own life, as well. "Search me, O God, and know my heart, and try me and know my anxieties; and see if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting."

That is Psalm 139, verses 23 and 24. Let us not be critical of the gifts which others give to Christ to honor Him, or to show Him their love. Let us not think of offerings unto the Lord as something wasteful. Let us ask ourselves whether we have a generous spirit as Mary did? Are we willing to give to Christ what is most precious to ourselves in terms of our resources and possessions? Are we pursuing peace toward every brother and sister around us? Let us beware of the sins of covetousness and a critical attitude toward other brothers and sisters around us.

I think of those verses in Ephesians 5. "Therefore be imitators of God as dear children, and walk in love, as Christ also has loved us and given Himself for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet-smelling aroma. This is what Mary was doing and picturing for us that day. She wanted to love, as Christ had loved her. The text here in Ephesians goes on to say, "But fornication and all uncleanness or covetousness, let it not even be named among you, as is fitting for saints; neither filthiness, nor foolish talking, nor coarse jesting, which are not fitting, but rather giving of thanks."

This is what is set before each disciple of Jesus Christ; whether they will pursue subtle or secret sins, or whether they will give thanks, and show forth that thankful spirit in giving of themselves to good works which will truly honor Christ. **Then finally – We want to look at the commendation Jesus gives to Mary in the presence of the disciples gathered there that evening.** (verses 7 and 8, and Mark 14: 8)

"But Jesus said, 'Let her alone; she has kept this for the day of My burial.' 'For the poor you have with you always, but Me you do not have always.' Mark says, 'She has done what she could.' 'She has come beforehand to anoint My body for burial.' This oil of spikenard; this precious oil, was something that Mary had laid up beforehand for such a time as this. Jesus commends her for it. Even so, we ought to lay up something lavish to serve Christ with, of our own resources. Think of how you might draw attention to Him by the giving of a gift, to the glory

of Christ. Think of some act of kind generosity to His cause, which will show forth your thankfulness to Him for everything that He has done for you and all the grace and truth that He has given you. Mary is commended for “doing what she could.”

Ask yourself as I close this sermon; am I doing what I can, to draw attention to the death of Christ, and to the resurrection life of Christ? Let not the poor be neglected in your thinking, but think about how you can show forth the fragrance of Christ to those who are perishing and to those who are being saved. Think of the words of 2 Corinthians Chapter 2 and verse 12. “Furthermore, when I came to Troas to preach Christ’s gospel, and a door was opened to me by the Lord, I had no rest in my spirit, because I did not find Titus my brother; but taking my leave of them, I departed for Macedonia.”

“Now thanks be to God who always leads us in triumph in Christ, and through us diffuses the fragrance of His knowledge in every place.” “For we are to God the fragrance of Christ among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing.” “To the one we are the aroma of death leading to death, and to the other the aroma of life leading to life.” “And who is sufficient for these things?” “For we are not, as so many, peddling the word of God; but as of sincerity, but as from God, we speak in the sight of God in Christ.”

O that each one of us would go to the closet of our hearts and take the alabaster box of the oil of spikenard; those resources and precious possessions; what has been so valuable and costly and precious to us; that which we have saved for ourselves; let us break it and pour it out upon Christ to honor Him. Let us pour it out in love for Him upon His cause and kingdom. Let us honor His death for us, and let us honor His life given to us. And let the fragrance of our love for Him fill the room. Let glory come to your Savior and Lord by giving Him your best. More love to Thee, O Christ; more love to Thee.