

At this point in John's gospel, we see the transition from Jesus' public ministry to the start of his passion. He's on the way to Jerusalem, and He knows that He is going there to die. And as you just heard, Mary knows it, too. Both Matthew & Mark also include this encounter, and give us a few extra details – Mary pours the ointment over Jesus' head as well as His feet, Jesus calls her her action “beautiful”, and promises that this story will accompany the gospel wherever it goes.

Matthew, Mark, and John are all pointing forward towards Jesus' death, and Mary's actions form a sharp contrast with the attitude and actions of Judas. We see Judas following Jesus for completely selfish reasons. *Judas* is all about money; *Jesus* is all about saving the world; and *Mary* is all about Jesus.

So I want you to think of today's text as a jigsaw puzzle. I'm going to put all the pieces on the table, and the theme of *Christian hospitality* will be the edge pieces, the frame around the picture. It's relatively easy to put the edge pieces in place, but finishing the puzzle is the greater challenge, and the main puzzle for us to work out is what Jesus meant in verse 8. We know that Judas' motives were wicked, but his complaint seems pretty reasonable. **Why is it better to anoint Jesus for burial than it is to give to the poor?** We *believe* that it is, because Jesus said so, but unless we *understand* why, we won't be able to learn from or apply the principle that Jesus is using. We have the right pieces, but it can be tricky to put them together. If we do put them together, though, we will see Jesus clearly, and that sight will transform us into His image.

So let's look at the pieces of John 12:1-2:

“Six days before passover” – Whenever you hear of six days, you should remember the story of creation and think “We're haven't gotten to the day of rest yet.” And whenever you think of Passover, you should be thinking of a blood atonement that saves God's people. And since this is the story of Jesus, by reading between the lines, you should hear in John's words the announcement that Jesus is heading towards Jerusalem to shed His blood to bring rest to God's people. On the way, He “came to Bethany, where Lazarus was, whom Jesus had raised from the dead”. Isn't that a wonderful follow-up? Jesus is going to die, but remember, Jesus and death don't see eye to eye. The first phrase fills you with dread, the last phrase with hope.

“So they gave a dinner” - Notice the word “so”. It's just the natural response to the presence of Christ. Isn't that a wonderful attitude? “Jesus is here; let's eat!” Here is a classic example that defines what Christian hospitality is: *bringing people together for a meal with Jesus*.

Hospitality is not the main point of this passage, but I don't want us to miss the lessons we can learn from it anyway: In part because of the lessons Jesus has already taught this family, they work together to bring people around Jesus over a meal. Don't have a big enough house? Find

someone else's, as might be the case here. (Matthew and Mark tell us that this dinner was held at Simon the Leper's house). Christian hospitality needs quiet servants like Martha, who always seems like she's in the kitchen rather than in the middle. Christian hospitality also needs people to recline at the table and share in the conversation, too. Hospitality is not just for good cooks, and it's not just for extroverts.

The important thing is to have it deep in your heart that since Jesus is with you, you should bring others together for a meal with Jesus. “*With Jesus*” is the important part: even pagans show hospitality, but Christians have something beautiful to offer their guests that no one else has: *fellowship with Jesus*.

Those are the edge pieces of the puzzle. Now we get to the main part of the picture. “Mary took a pound” - roman pound, which was about 12oz - “of expensive ointment made from pure nard” - the good stuff, the once-in-lifetime gift kind of stuff. For all you men who can't relate to this perfume stuff, it'd be like Lazarus offering his bottle of Pappy Van Winkle. “and anointed the feet of Jesus” - this is double honor. Not just a foot *washing*, as was customary for guests (Lk. 7:44), but a foot *anointing*. Water cleanses, the ointment glorifies.

“and wiped His feet with her hair” - most likely Mary is dealing with the excess from a full 12oz of perfume. Using her hair would have been a very personal and intimate act, a socially unacceptable, David-dancing-before-the-Lord type of act.

“The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.” Why is this detail included? What are we supposed to make of this? One commentator points out that this sounds like an eyewitness detail, a first-person account, lending truth and authority to the story. Well, maybe. But I think that this phrase tells us more than that. Set this piece aside for minute. We'll come back to it.

That's Mary's action. She has blown past all the normal requirements of hospitality. This is something different, something more striking. And it strikes Judas all wrong.

V. 4 - “but Judas” - Notice that his character is consistent. He is not someone who suddenly fell into great evil. He is constantly leaning in the other direction from Jesus.

“why was this ointment not sold for three hundred denarii” - Think about how much you make in a year, and then think about pouring it out in a moment. A year of your life, compressed into 12oz of perfume, and poured out just like that.

“and given to the poor” - We need to see this at two levels: Judas' *mouth*, and Judas' *heart*. On the surface, it seems that Judas is prioritizing mercy ministry over lavish gifts at a dinner party. And it's hard not to be on his side. When people are starving and fainting and dying from hunger, what could possibly justify such extravagance? It's a *good* question from a *bad* heart.

v.6 - “not because he cared” - The Holy Spirit gives us insight into Judas' heart. He doesn't actually care about the poor. He just wants a chance to take his “moneybag carrier's tax”. This is where the contrast is so stark: Mary *empties herself* in order to share in Jesus' life and work. Judas wants to use Jesus' life and work to *fill himself up*. *We need to realize that some people only help the poor in order to help themselves*. This is why deacons in the church must be spiritual men, and they must be tested before serving as deacons. Wolves always offer to help the sheep.

v.7 – “leave her alone” - Jesus' reply defends Mary, because Judas' words were a sharp critique of her *actions*, and because she had put so much of *herself* into her gift, it was a criticism of *Mary*. [Side note – Jesus spends a lot of his time defending Mary from criticism. Aren't you glad to have a friend like Jesus?]

“so that she may keep it for the day of my burial” - The translation is a bit tricky, making it sound like Jesus wants her to save it for His burial in the future, but it is obviously too late for that. Thankfully, Matthew and Mark help clarify that Jesus is affirming her present action, not instructing her for the future. He is being anointed *beforehand* for burial. Mary knows that Jesus is on the way to Jerusalem to die, and so she does everything she can to help Him get ready. It's amazing how many times the disciples tried to *stop* Him; only Mary tries to *help* Him.

Jesus sides with Mary over against Judas. Judas' priorities are wrong; Mary's are right. Some things are more important than helping the poor, even when it looks like extravagant consumerism, lavish waste. If we forget that, then we leave ourselves wide open to being manipulated by those who claim to be helping the poor.

But we need to ask the question: *what are those things?* Because *not everything*, and actually, *not very many things*, are more important than caring for the poor. If we misuse this verse as an excuse to enrich ourselves when we ought to be helping the poor, we are actually imitating *Judas*, not obeying *Jesus!* And any interpretation that ends up with the application “Be like Judas.” is *not* a good interpretation.

And so in order to finish this puzzle, we need to understand vs. 8. Jesus gives us the reason why Mary is right and Judas is wrong. We see that it has something to do with the difference between *a temporary opportunity* and *an option that is forever available*, so *timing* is part of it. But when Jesus says “you won't always have me.” How should we understand that “me” (fronted for emphasis in Greek)? We know that it has *something* to do with Jesus; but *what is it* about Jesus that outranks the needs of the poor?

So here are four options for understanding vs. 8 -

First, ***Jesus as personal friend*** – there will always be generic poor; you won't always be

able to show love to friends. Which is the more meaningful act: cutting a check to a charity, or blessing a someone you love? Lavish gifts given to strengthen the ties of love are not wasteful. On this view, the idea is that *duties of friendship outrank the needs of the poor*.

The problem with this interpretation is that Jesus actually tells us the opposite: when you have a dinner party, don't invite your friends or those who can pay you back. Invite the poor and needy! So that can't be what it means.

Second, ***Jesus as dead person*** – there will always be poor people, but you only have one chance to show proper respect to the dead. On this interpretation, *last-rite duties of respect to the image of God outrank the needs of the poor*. And some commentators have pointed out that there is evidence that some Jews operated by this principle.

But the odd thing here is that Jesus isn't dead yet. And, after he dies, *other* women are going to prepare him for burial, making Mary's lavish gift unnecessary. Well-meant, maybe, but still wasteful. And why does Mary do it now? If all Mary is saying is that Jesus should be honored in death, it's a little creepy. It'd be like buying someone a coffin before they die. Can you imagine the UPS man dropping off a coffin from one of your friends? Doesn't seem like honoring somebody. It kinda seems like they want you dead! I don't think this is what Jesus means.

Third, ***Jesus as God and Lord*** (His *person*) – you can only show honor to God come in the flesh now. *God's glory outranks the needs of the poor*. This is how some people justify lavish church buildings, for instance. But since we can always glorify God through lavish buildings, it doesn't fit the immediacy of Jesus' words. And if you remember, there were some people who committed the money that they would have spent caring for their parents to God, basically impoverishing their parents in the name of glorifying God. But Jesus doesn't *praise* those people for *glorifying* God; He *rebukes* them for *disobeying* God. This can't be the right way to understand verse 8. It does not glorify God to give Him lavish gifts while ignoring the needs of the people around you.

Fourth, ***Jesus as Messiah*** (His *work*) – you can always give alms; you can only anoint the Messiah for his mission once. **Duties of worship, and specifically, *sacrificial atonement*, outranks the needs of the poor.** This fourth view is the one I believe is correct, and to see why, we need to make some OT connections. In Leviticus 4, God's people were told to construct and operate an altar of incense in the temple, to fill God's house with a pleasing fragrance. Think about it this way: sin stinks to high heaven, quite literally! God loves the smell of obedience, but when we sin, we become a stench in God's nostrils. And so He tells us how to overpower our stinky sins with sweet-smelling fragrance at the altar of incense. And sure enough, Leviticus 4 tells us that the altar of incense plays this role *in the sin offering*. Sweet incense overpowers stinky sin while that sin is being dealt with.

Now look with me at Ephesians 5:2. Paul tells us: “Walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.” Do you hear that? Be like Jesus, a fragrant offering to God. Paul combines these two ideas, Jesus giving Himself for us, and the fragrant offerings to God. Isn't that what John 12 is talking about? Why won't they always have Jesus with them? Because he is about to give Himself for them. What does Mary do? She turns Jesus into a fragrant offering, covering up the smell of the sins that He bore for our sake, until atonement was made by His death.

And why does this outrank the needs of the poor? Because what the poor need *even more than they need money* in this life is *to be saved!* What good would it do for the poor to be made rich in worldly wealth, but to have no atonement made for their sins? Now, this does not mean that God's people should not care for the poor. *Judas* is the one who doesn't care, not Jesus. But the position Jesus takes is that His atoning work on the cross is *more important* than the work of caring for the poor! Don't worry about what kills the body; worry about what can destroy both soul and body in hell!

I've been struggling to figure out how to apply this passage to our lives today, and if Jesus were saying that it's okay to be lavish with friends or to build expensive churches, then that's what we should be doing. But He isn't saying that: He's saying that *atonement for the sins of the world* is more important than *eliminating poverty from the world*. Understand carefully: Jesus hates poverty. He hates to see people suffer hunger and want. But He hates sin more, because sin is the *root* of suffering. Jesus teaches us to hate the branches – He tells us that we will always have the poor around. Why does he tell us this? Mark's version says, *so that we can do them good whenever we want*. **Jesus wants us to do good to the poor!** Do I need to say it again?

But here's the big deal: hate the branches, yes, *but hate the root more*. And this is something that many churches have forgotten. They have derailed the Church from her central mission of preaching this good news: that by presenting Himself as a fragrant offering for sin, Jesus has made atonement for us so that we can be restored to fellowship with God.

Instead of focusing on preaching *that* good news, instead of doing the hard work of writing creeds and confessions that protect the good news, instead of taking the time to catechize children with that good news, the mainline Churches *downplayed* the sacrifice of Jesus, and *reduced* following Jesus to “caring for the poor”. But Jesus told us that there is something more important than caring for the poor.

And since we didn't listen, even though many people have been clothed and fed in the name of Jesus, *they haven't had the gospel preached to them*, they haven't repented of their sins and trusted in Christ, and so *they haven't received the benefits of Jesus' fragrant offering of Himself*.

They received money in Jesus' name, *and they died in their sins*. And O God, Jesus told us not to let that happen. Woe to us if we let care for the poor cause us to lose sight of preaching Jesus the fragrant offering and sacrifice to God for sinners!

Now, we do not *always* have to choose. Jesus doesn't say: "Either love the poor or love me!" But *sometimes*, we do have to choose. Mary had a choice to make: either sell the perfume, or anoint Jesus. And sometimes, you have to choose. When you support a ministry, do they preach the gospel and help the poor, or just help the poor? Which is more important to teach your kids: be generous to the poor, or Christ's sacrificial death for the salvation of the world? You need to get this right, for your sake, for your children's sake, and for the sake of the poor.

But here's the wonderful thing. If you are struggling with Jesus' ranking of priorities, take comfort in this: When you keep your eyes of the cross of Christ, you get helping the poor thrown in. By going to the cross, Jesus *both* offered Himself as an offering for sin, *and* showed us that love means giving your life away for others. If helping the poor was the main thing, then going and getting Himself killed was the worst thing that Jesus could have done. After all, He could feed 5,000 with five loaves and two fish! No one could have helped the poor more than Jesus!

But the cross helps the poor by doing more than just helping the poor. When the goal is the salvation of the world, the salvation of the poor is included. The cause of the poor does not lose by taking second place to the cause of saving the world. Because Jesus presented Himself as a fragrant offering for the world, everything wrong with the world is being made right again. That's what Mary saw. That's why Mary loved Jesus so much. That's why she gave Him everything she had. By keeping her eyes on Jesus, Mary saw the cross, the coming sacrifice. May God give us grace never to lose sight of the cross, and to be extravagant in spreading the fragrance of Christ throughout the world.

- *In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.*