

Message #46

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John

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MARY AND COMMITMENT TO JESUS

JOHN 11:55-12:8

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

In February of this year, 110 girls were taken from a boarding school in northeastern Nigeria by the terrorist group Boko Haram. There were already negotiations going on between that group and the government about arranging some kind of peace deal. The current head of the Nigerian government is himself a Muslim. So Boko Haram decided to release all of the girls--- except for one. (PROJECTOR ON--- LEAH SHARIBU) She is a 15-year-old Christian by the name of Leah Sharibu. She is a committed Christian. Boko Haram leaders told her that if she would embrace Islam, they would let her go. She refused. The most recent report is that they have given her a month to convert, or they will kill her. How is that for a load of stress for a young Christian gal to bear? (PROJECTOR OFF)

Our story today is about another Christian woman who displayed a tenacious commitment to Jesus in the face of opposition. In this case, the opposition came from insiders, from people who should have been supporters. Sometimes that happens to us. We are going to examine her story to see what we should learn from Mary about our own commitment to Jesus.

In our ongoing study of John's Gospel, we have been focusing on the seventh of seven signs around which the Apostle John has organized his biographical material about Jesus. The entire eleventh chapter describes the dramatic restoration to life of Lazarus, who had been dead for four days. We saw last week that this amazing event convinced even a few of the skeptics that they needed to follow Jesus. Still, the majority of the representatives of the religious establishment who saw this miracle with their own eyes would not believe in Jesus. They reported to the high council of Judaism, the Sanhedrin, about what happened, with the implication that this Jesus had to be stopped. So we saw that the Sanhedrin determined that council had to take action and arrange for the death of Jesus.

Passover week was approaching. Jesus and His disciples had come to Bethany (PROJECTOR ON--- BETHANY MAP) when they received the report that Lazarus was sick. It seems likely that Jesus and the

twelve disciples had stayed in the home of Lazarus and Martha and Mary when they came to Jerusalem for the three required annual feasts. With the additional attention that this latest miracle drew to Jesus, He and the disciples withdrew to a town a little further away. We pick up the story from there.

I.

In v. 55 of #11 through v. 1 of #12 we learn about JESUS AND HIS ENEMIES AND THE APPROACH TO A CONFRONTATION IN JERUSALEM. (I. JESUS AND HIS ENEMIES AND...) According to v. 55, **“Now the Passover of the Jews was at hand, and many went up from the country to Jerusalem before the Passover to purify themselves.”**

The special day of Passover was followed by the seven day Feast of Unleavened Bread. The entire week was often referred to simply as Passover. The feast was one of the three annual events held in Jerusalem which all good Jewish men were expected to attend. This is the third Passover identified in John’s Gospel. The first occurred in #2. That was the time when Jesus threw out the animal merchants and money changers from the temple. Chapter 6 makes reference to a second Passover. It was in that chapter that Jesus multiplied the loaves and the fish. Some commentators think that there was an additional Passover, not recorded by the Apostle John in his Gospel. So we are not approaching at least the third Passover celebration in the course of Jesus’ public ministry.

John mentions in v. 55 that there were already a lot of Jews who were showing up in metropolitan Jerusalem for the feast. Some Jews came from remote parts of the Roman Empire. It was always hard for them to know how long travel would take. So they were certain to show up at least a little early. Then also some Jews who lived outside of Jerusalem came early to purify themselves.

There were various things that would make Jews ritually unclean, which would keep them from being present in the temple. Numbers #19 v. 11 (NUMBERS 19:11) describes one of them. This part of the Mosaic law says, **“Whoever touches the dead body of any person shall be unclean seven days.”** There were certain washings and sacrifices that were required to get a person back into a state of ritual cleanliness. In the case of touching dead bodies, seven days were necessary before one could enter the temple. Many Jews showed up at least a week before Passover so that they could be cleansed and would be able to enter the temple. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Verse 56 in our passage says, **“They [the many people coming up from the country to Jerusalem] were looking for Jesus and saying to one another as they stood in the temple, ‘What do you think? That he**

will not come to the feast at all?” Some of these religious pilgrims would have known about Jesus from earlier visits to Jerusalem for the feasts. Some of them would be Galileans who knew about Jesus from His extensive ministry in Galilee. Since these people were already in the temple, they would have heard the story about the restoration to life of Lazarus.

They also knew about the opposition of the religious leaders to Jesus. Given the nature of that hatred, perhaps Jesus would not show Himself in Jerusalem for Passover. But then anyone presenting himself as a rabbi would be expected to observe the required feasts in Jerusalem. So what would Jesus do? He was something of a celebrity, though we don't get the sense that these people had any great loyalty or commitment to Jesus.

Verse 57: **“Now the chief priests and the Pharisees had given orders that if anyone knew where he was, he should let them know, so that they might arrest him.”** Thus the Jerusalem residents and the visiting pilgrims were aware that the religious leaders wanted to arrest Jesus. Wanted posters were up in the Post Office and news was on the radio and TV, or whatever means of communication were used to convey that message. Maybe Jesus would be a no-show.

Verse 1 of #12 tells us, **“Six days before the Passover, Jesus therefore came to Bethany, where Lazarus was, whom Jesus had raised from the dead.”** Assuming that Friday was the Passover, six days before that would be Saturday. Prior to the resuscitation of Lazarus, the twelve disciples were reluctant to return to Jerusalem and vicinity. Now with the added stir about the miracle with Lazarus, they had to be aware of the increased tension with the religious establishment. They felt the stress. A confrontation was brewing in Jerusalem.

II.

In vv. 2 & 3 of #12 we encounter MARY AND THE VALUE OF SACRIFICE FOR JESUS. (PROJECTOR ON--- II. MARY AND THE VALUE...) According to v. 2, **“So they gave a dinner for him there. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those reclining with him at table.”**

Both the Gospel of Matthew and Mark describe this same incident. Mark gives us this added bit of information in #14 v. 3 (MARK 14:3): **“While he was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, as he was reclining at table, a woman came with an alabaster flask of ointment of pure nard, very costly, and she broke the flask and poured it over his head.”**

Without this bit of information we would have assumed that the supper took place at the home of Lazarus and Martha and Mary. We have no further explanation about the identity of this Simon character. If he still had leprosy, he would be ritually defiling for all of the people present. In other words, all of the people present would not have been permitted to show up in the temple without going through the process of cleansing. So it is doubtful that Simon still had leprosy. At the same time, there is no record in the Hebrew Bible of a Jewish person, other than Miriam the sister of Moses, ever being healed of leprosy. A reasonable conclusion would be that Simon had been cured of his leprosy by Jesus. He and the family of Lazarus were holding this supper to show their appreciation to Jesus for what He had done for them. Verse 1 of our passage specifically notes that Lazarus is present. He is apparently none the worse for wear after his death experience.

The guests are said to be reclining at table. The custom in this place and time was to have low tables with pillows and mats around the table. The guests would lay on mats with their legs stretched out away from the table. It is noted that Martha was helping to serve.

To get a fuller picture of Martha and Mary, it is helpful to look at an earlier incident recorded in the Bible involving Martha and Mary and Jesus. That is found in Luke #10. (LUKE 10:38) Beginning in v. 38 of that chapter, we read, **“Now as they [Jesus and the disciples] went on their way, Jesus entered a village. And a woman named Martha welcomed him into her house. (LUKE 10:39) And she had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord’s feet and listened to his teaching. (LUKE 10:40) But Martha was distracted with much serving. And she went up to him and said, ‘Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me.’ (LUKE 10:41) But the Lord answered her, ‘Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, (LUKE 10:42) but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her.’”**

In both that incident and the present one, we find Mary at the feet of Jesus. We also find Martha serving in both situations. But this time we do not hear a word of complaint about her service. She seems to have learned from the earlier encounter with Jesus. Serving, especially with a right attitude, is a good thing. (PROJECTOR OFF)

In v. 3 of our passage, we are told, **“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.”** Mark’s Gospel says that the ointment came in an alabaster jar. (PROJECTOR ON--- ALABASTER JAR) Here are a couple of examples of alabaster jars which come from the Greek world before the time of Jesus. Alabaster is a fine grained gypsum. Mark says that Mary broke the jar, apparently the top, and poured it out.

Nard, or spikenard (SPIKENARD), was a scented oil or ointment that came from a plant that grows in the hills of the Himalayas in India. It was very expensive. It was imported from India and was used on festive occasions to anoint a special guest, like a king or a member of the royal family. It might also be used in a burial. (PROJECTOR OFF)

The amount that Mary had was between eleven and twelve ounces in our American measuring system. It was very expensive. In v. 5 it will be noted that it was worth 300 denarii. A denarius was the typical pay for a common laborer for one day's work. So in Judea, with Sabbath days off as well as religious holidays, this would amount to a year's pay. This jar of nard could represent a family inheritance or an investment. I tried to get an idea about its equivalent value today, and I checked with the arbiter of all retail prices today--- Amazon. I found that an equivalent amount of nard could be purchased for a little over \$4000. So it is pricey even by today's standards.

Mark's account says that Mary broke the jar and poured the oil or ointment on Jesus' head. I suspect that it covered the rest of His body. Eventually some of it ended up on Jesus' feet, and she wiped it there with her hair. Perhaps she was wiping off the excess. Normally it was the job of the lowest ranking servant to clean the feet of a guest. Mary is doing that job here.

It was also the cultural norm for women to keep their hair gathered up on their heads, especially before people outside of the family. Mary is acting outside of all of these norms to express her humble gratitude and worship of Jesus. The smell of the perfume filled the house. Such was the impact of her beautiful deed.

Martha and Mary seem to be without husbands. The loss of the only man in a family often meant financial destitution for a family in the Ancient Near East. This family does appear to have financial resources. But this deed of Mary was a heartfelt demonstration of thanksgiving and worship. It involved a sacrificial gift. This was perhaps the most significant gift and act of worship directed to Jesus which is recorded in the Gospels. It was indeed a sacrifice for Jesus.

Have you ever done something like that for Jesus? Perhaps it was a financial gift that represented a real sacrifice. Perhaps it was a gift of time or service.

Jason Brown was an offensive lineman for the Baltimore Ravens and then the St. Louis Rams. At the height of his career he quit football. His agent told him that he was “making the biggest mistake of his life.” Jason Brown went out and bought a thousand acre farm. He named it “First Fruits.” When he harvested his first crop, he got fifty tons of sweet potatoes. He gave them all away. A representative of the Society of St. Andrew told a North Carolina television station, **“It’s unusual for a grower to grow a crop just to give [it] away.”**

Jason, you see, is a committed Christian. He told an interviewer, **“It was time to start giving back... God has blessed us with this place, and I am to be a steward, to use all these good things to help other people.”** In regard to his leaving football, he added, **“When I think about a life of greatness, I think about a life of service.”** (Breakpoint, 11/27/2014)

III.

Like the agent for Jason Brown, Mary also had her critics for her sacrificial deed. Verses 4-6 of #12 describe JUDAS AND THE DANGER OF ATTACKS FROM INSIDERS. (PROJECTOR ON--- III. JUDAS AND THE DANGER...) In vv. 4 & 5 we read, **“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?’”**

The ointment did not smell so good to Judas. He saw Mary’s sacrifice as a waste. In reality, he wanted a cut of it. But he had to hide his real motives. He indicated that he was motivated by concern for the poor, for the down and out.

That was a line that April Parks might have used for many years. Do you know about her? She had a business based right here in Boulder City. She worked as a professional guardian for the elderly who needed capable people to manage their affairs. This week she pleaded guilty in court to stealing thousands and thousands of dollars from scores of unsuspecting clients who looked to her for help in their old age. She could spend up to 84 years in prison for her misdeeds.

Matthew and Mark tell us that the other disciples joined in with the criticism initiated by Judas. Critics sometimes are effective in appealing to the judgmental nature of others. In effect, their criticism is also directed against Jesus. Jesus ought to have stopped Mary from wasting this valuable resource.

Still, Mary was the direct object of their criticism. How do you suppose that she felt? The attacks that she got were not from outsiders, but from insiders, from the apostles of Jesus.

Verse 6: **“He [Judas] 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.”** Here is the real motivation of Judas. Judas appears to be the only Judean in the band of disciples. The rest were Galileans. Matthew was a tax collector. So he knew about financial management. Perhaps the reputation of tax collectors was a factor in him not serving as the treasurer of the group. The fact that the group let Judas handle the money indicates that they apparently trusted him. They did not appear to doubt his integrity. Back in #6 v. 70 Jesus warned the disciples that one of them was a devil. But like so much of what Jesus said, that remark went right over their heads.

Judas had an initial interest and attraction to Jesus. Like the other disciples, he was hoping for the establishment of God’s kingdom upon the earth. He wanted to have a part in that action. Along with the other disciples, he had been given power by Jesus to heal people. He saw Jesus in action, and he heard His teaching. But he never quite bought Jesus’ whole story. Disillusionment set in as opposition to Jesus rose. He began to realize that Jesus was not about to establish an earthly kingdom anytime soon. The Romans and the Sanhedrin were going to stay in power.

There was also danger that the disciples would be punished for their attachment to Jesus. At the same time, Judas began borrowing money from the groups funds. Perhaps he initially planned to give it back. But with no accountability and no sign of this Jesus movement taking political power, he just started taking money for himself. He was upset that Mary’s nard was not sold and added to the Jesus bank account so that he could get his cut of the proceeds. Judas had become a thief and a traitor.

Today is Veterans’ Day. We appreciate the many veterans whom we have in our congregation. This is also the one hundredth year anniversary of Armistice Day, marking the end of WWI. My grandfather was present in France for that occasion. A month later he marched in his unit, the 32nd Division, outside of Paris as it was reviewed by President Wilson and General Pershing.

There is not a finer man who could be honored on this day than Major Brent Taylor. (BRENT TAYLOR) Brent Taylor was the mayor of North Ogden, Utah. Last January this married father of seven voluntarily stepped down from his job and joined his National Guard unit in Afghanistan to train Afghan commandos. A little over a week ago one of the Afghan soldiers whom he was training, turned on him and shot him dead. It was an attack from an insider, from a betrayer. His body was returned to the US on election day. (PROJECTOR OFF)

It is hard to go through life without having some kind of attack from an insider---- from a fellow student or a co-worker or a supposed friend or from a family member. It can even happen in the church. Philosopher Martin Buber wrote in his book *Good and Evil*, **“Since the primary motive of the evil is disguise, one of the places evil people are most likely to be found is within the church. What better way to conceal one’s evil from oneself, as well as from others, than to be a deacon or some other highly visible form of Christian within our culture? ... I do not mean to imply that the evil are anything other than a small minority among the religious or that the religious motives of most people are in any way spurious. I mean only that evil people tend to gravitate toward piety for the disguise and concealment it can offer them.”** Such it was for Judas.

The “Me Too” Movement arose out of situations where women trusted powerful men who took advantage of them. These were attacks from insiders. This kind of abuse has been rampant within some segments of the Catholic Church. What a horrible attack for priests who use cover as supposed servants of God to take advantage of vulnerable young people, especially boys. Occasionally such things can even happen in the evangelical church.

The situation in our passage was that Mary made a significant sacrifice to show her love and thankfulness and worship of Jesus. Yet she took flack for it from insiders. Such a thing can happen to us as well.

IV.

In vv. 7 & 8 we encounter JESUS AND THE SUFFICIENCY OF APPROVAL FROM HIM. (PROJECTOR ON--- IV. JESUS AND THE SUFFICIENCY OF...) Verse 7 tells us, **“Jesus said, ‘Leave her alone, so that she may keep it for the day of my burial.’”** The exact meaning of the original text is a bit uncertain here. It could be that Jesus is saying that Mary should save the ointment that she wiped up with her hair to be used on Him on the day of His burial. It is more probable that Jesus is saying that Mary should keep this custom of preparing the body for burial. Jesus appreciates what Mary had done in preparing His body for burial more than if she did it when He was dead. He is rebuking the disciples for their criticism.

It is also unclear if Mary realized that Jesus was soon to die and was doing this deed to prepare Him for death and burial. Mary certainly seemed to have a greater sensitivity than anyone else did about what Jesus needed and what was appropriate for the situation at hand. Perhaps Mary did not realize that Jesus was about to die and that she did this deed simply as an expression of gratitude for the One who had raised her brother from the dead. In addition to that, she realized that Jesus was the Son of God and the Messiah prophesied in the Old Testament. What she did was an act of worship. She seized the

opportunity and made the most of it. Jesus knew what was about to happen, and He received her deed as an anointing of His body for burial.

The danger for us is that we can miss opportunities for sacrifice and giving and worship and service. It is easy for us to rationalize in our minds: "When my finances are in a little better shape, then I can start giving..." "When I have more time, then I can volunteer for some kind of service." "When I get out of school, when I get set in business, when my family is a little more settled, when I retire, then I can--- fill in the blank." Meanwhile opportunities may come along to glorify Jesus in some way, and we miss them. We have not developed the sensitive heart that Mary had.

Verse 8: **"For the poor you always have with you, but you do not always have me."** There is an implicit warning here that we need to beware of people and programs that say that we can eliminate poverty. It will not happen this side of heaven. That does not mean that we are to ignore the poor. Jesus told the rich man in Mark #10 to sell everything and give it to the poor. Then he would have riches in heaven.

The issue here is one of priorities. Jesus is to have our first attention. Mary did a great thing for Jesus. She acted out of a motive of thanksgiving and worship and service. Her action was perhaps contrary to culture, pragmatically ridiculous, and offensive to peers. She took flack for it. But Jesus was pleased by it.

As Christians we are responsible to encourage and appreciate one another. But we are imperfect and fall short. Sometimes we may not get the attention and recognition and support that we deserve. The test of our faith may be when we do the right things, when we serve Jesus from the heart and get nothing: no money, no recognition, no appreciation. Instead we get criticism. The extent to which we fail the test may reveal how much of our motivation is to serve self, to get recognition for me.

If you do what is right, if you serve Jesus from the heart, is it enough for you that Jesus Christ sees and is pleased? Is that sufficient for you?

In Mark #14 Jesus is recorded (MARK 14:8) as saying of Mary, **"She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for burial. (MARK 14:9) And truly, I say to you, wherever the gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her."** Here we are 2000 years later, and we can still smell the sweet aroma of what Mary did for Jesus.

Seize the opportunity that you have to serve and glorify Jesus. Let our motive be to win His approval.
(PROJECTOR OFF)