



Have you ever been invited to a dinner held in your honor? Like your family hosting a birthday or a graduation dinner for you? Those are such fun and memorable occasions that we've all hopefully enjoyed. Just recently my wife and kids made a fantastic dinner at home for my birthday complete with gifts and an ice cream cake from Baskin-Robbins. It was a really fun and wonderful night. I felt loved and honored.

What if the same dinner was hosted by a group of people who society had turned its back on and was not my family? These were a group of misfits, outcasts and dangerous people. What if the dinner host had an infectious disease? What if one of the dinner guests recently lay rotting in a grave, dead but somehow miraculously brought back to life? There will also be a man at the dinner who is a notorious thief and a liar. He is used as a pawn for Satan himself. And that's only three of the characters at this dinner! Not to mention the dinner will be rudely interrupted by a woman who does something way out of bounds culturally speaking. How would I respond to such an invitation on my birthday? It sounds like something we'd see on *The Maury Povich Show!* We are going to see all this drama unfold this morning as we continue our study of the biography of Jesus written by his best friend John.

**Six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, where Lazarus lived, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. Here a dinner was given in Jesus' honor. Martha served, while Lazarus was among those reclining at the table with him. Then Mary took about a pint of pure nard, an expensive perfume; she poured it on Jesus' feet and wiped his feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.**

But one of his disciples, Judas Iscariot, who was later to betray him, objected, "Why wasn't this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year's wages." He did not say this because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief; as keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it.

"Leave her alone," Jesus replied. "It was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial. You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me."

Meanwhile a large crowd of Jews found out that Jesus was there and came, not only because of him but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from

**the dead. So the chief priests made plans to kill Lazarus as well, for on account of him many of the Jews were going over to Jesus and believing in him (John 12:1–11).**

### **Jesus Anointed at Bethany**

#### **Jesus accepts a dinner invitation from Simon the Leper**

Jesus arrived in Bethany where Lazarus lived, the same man he had recently raised from the dead. One evening he received an invitation to a dinner party, hosted in his honor, from Simon the Leper (Mark 14:3). I bring that up because I want to set the stage for this dinner. First of all, you would never eat dinner at a leper's house unless you knew the leper had been fully healed. If he wasn't healed it might mean a whole new thing when you ask him to pass you something! There would be more than a hair to worry about in the salad too! According to Jewish law any contact with lepers defiled the person who touched them. Since they were at Simon's home it points to the fact that Jesus had truly healed him. On another occasion Jesus healed ten lepers but only one of those thanked him (Luke 17). In our story, Simon is so grateful to Jesus he throws a dinner to honor him and celebrate the new life given to his good friend Lazarus. This would be a truly memorable night, unlike any dinner party they've ever been to.

In the previous chapter of John, Lazarus is in a tomb, dead. But, in the presence of the author of life, dead people don't stay dead! Jesus shouted, "Lazarus, come out!" And at the sound of his voice, Lazarus awakened and walked out of the tomb peeling off his grave clothes. As you can imagine, news of this miracle spreads like wildfire throughout Palestine and soon their little dinner party will be interrupted by people wanting to see Jesus and Lazarus in person.

So at this dinner we have Jesus, Simon the Leper, Lazarus, the 12 disciples and probably a few other folks not mentioned. There was also Martha who was doing what she does best, preparing the food and serving the guests. This is a new Martha, one who now understands that the spirit of her service is just as important as the service itself. She is no longer frustrated about the lack of help at this dinner party. Her attitude has been changed. Her service to Jesus is an act of worship.

This is one of those dinner parties I would have loved to be invited to. I can't think of many things more enjoyable than eating with and delighting in the company of Jesus. I imagine Simon

and Lazarus trying to “one-up” each other with story after story of their time with Jesus. I picture Simon trying to explain to the others what it was like to be healed from leprosy and be whole again. He’s asking them to feel his now soft and healthy skin. He’s enjoying fellowship that he’s longed for and hasn’t had in years. Then there’s Lazarus who tries to describe the feeling of resurrection power and new life. There are just not enough words to describe his overwhelming experience. By this point, the wine is flowing freely and the smell of freshly baked bread and roasted lamb stew lingers throughout the entire house, leaking out the windows and doors. Laughter can be heard from miles away as this group of well over 16 people enjoy a good meal and wonderful conversation well into the night.

Don’t you just love places and times like that? There is nothing better in life than enjoying a good meal with great friends. It was a really wonderful evening and then something great was about to take place.

### **Mary anoints Jesus’ feet with nard**

After dinner had been served, everyone reclined enjoying another story from Peter. Mary quietly enters the room and suddenly breaks open a jar of pure nard. She pours this oil all over Jesus’ body. She then pours it on the feet of Jesus and wipes his feet with her own hair. The room is absolutely silent. All eyes are on Mary, but her eyes are focused squarely on Jesus.

Because of ancient custom, Mary was most likely not part of the dinner party because she was a woman. Maybe she had been helping Martha in the kitchen with dinner or sitting quietly in another room listening to the conversations through the walls. At some point her heart swelled with love and gratitude for her Lord who had brought her brother Lazarus back from the dead and restored him to their family. Finally Mary can’t wait any longer and slips into the room behind Jesus. In that day people did not sit at a dining room table and chairs like the ones in our homes. They reclined on their sides on couches, with their legs and feet behind them. They would be reclining around a low table in a U-shape fashion.

Suddenly, Mary breaks the jar she had been holding and pours the sweet-smelling contents all over Jesus from head to toe. What Mary does next was something truly outrageous. She loosens her hair and begins to wipe the feet of Jesus with it. In that day, a woman’s hair was only to be seen by her husband; it was a symbol of beauty and honor. To unbind your hair in the presence of other men was a dishonorable and shameful act. Not to mention she wipes Jesus’ feet with her hair. I don’t have to remind you how nasty feet were in those days! Soon, the entire room is filled with the sweet smell of nard. Just imagine the overwhelming smell of a flower shop and you get a better idea. Sadly, not everyone was happy with Mary’s act of devotion.

### **Judas believes the act is a waste of money**

Judas is quick to rebuke Mary protesting, *“Why wasn’t this perfume sold and the money given to the poor?”* (v. 5). That’s a great question. Judas has a good point. Pure nard was a very rare and precious spice. It’s made from an aromatic herb grown in the high pasture-land of the Himalayas, between Tibet and India. Because it was grown in such a remote region it had to be carried on camelback through miles and miles of mountain passes. Even the jar containing the perfume was expensive. It was an alabaster jar made out of white fine-grained gypsum. A pound of pure nard would have been a huge and lavish gift worth about a year’s wages. Just think about how much money you make in a year. Then imagine buying one of the world’s most rarest spices with that amount and pouring it all over one person in honor. Seems extravagant doesn’t it?

Instead Judas wants the money given to the poor or at least that’s what he says. We see this tension in churches all the time. A well-intentioned person doesn’t like the new lights, sound board and fancy drum set. She complains, “We could have used that money to start a new orphanage in Africa!” I live with that tension every day as a pastor and elder at CPC. I think the issue has to do with extravagance. When extravagance is pursued at the expense of the ministry to the poor, there is a problem.

If you were at this dinner how would you respond to Mary? Do you think, if I had that much money, I’d do the same thing? Or do you think, that’s the most ridiculous, immature behavior I’ve heard of? Not to mention it’s a waste of money that could have been used for a more noble cause. John, the author of this story, doesn’t want us to be fooled by Judas. Judas didn’t really care about the poor, but as the keeper of the money bag, he knew how much he could get for the nard and wanted to get rich quick and die trying.

### **Jesus rebukes Judas and defends Mary**

Jesus quickly criticizes Judas and defends Mary. *“Leave her alone,” Jesus replied. “It was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial. You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me”* (verses 7–8). After this great act of devotion Mary looks around the room only to see angry glances and looks of shocked disapproval. As shame begins to creep into her heart she wonders, “Did I do a good thing?” The only one to come to her defense is the only One whose opinion matters. When Mary is being criticized by everyone, Jesus comes to her rescue. But his response needs to be clarified.

Jesus is not saying we should do nothing for the poor. As followers of Christ we have a responsibility to care for the poor and we do. When Jesus was alive and at Simon’s dinner table, the needs of the poor, at that very moment in time, take a back seat to the kingdom of God. The poor will always be present, but

Jesus will not always be around in the flesh. He's simply saying, enjoy me while you can; time is running out.

Jesus' response also makes us wonder, did Mary really know she was anointing Jesus for burial? I think Mary knew exactly what she was doing. She's listened carefully to Jesus and has heard the numerous times Jesus foretold his own death. The problem in her mind is before Jesus dies, who would do the honors of anointing his body in preparation for burial? Mary owes Jesus her salvation and the recovery of her brother Lazarus. She is grateful and in pure dedication jumps at the chance to express her love to Jesus. One scholar suggests the nard was her entire life savings which would have been used as her wedding dowry. Mary gives everything she has to Jesus. She does this because nobody else seemed to understand the brutal reality of Jesus' death, nobody except Mary.

### **A large crowd of Jews come to interrupt the dinner**

As the drama during dinner continues to unfold a large crowd of Jews find out about Jesus and Lazarus and makes their way over to Simon's home. The dinner party is interrupted by this crowd. I am sure people wanted to see Lazarus for themselves. Imagine a large group of people interrupting my birthday dinner not because they want to celebrate with me, but because they wanted to see my brother-in law. My feelings would be hurt! That's what happens here. As the large crowd forms outside Simon's house, the chief priests are outraged and continue to boil with anger. They didn't like how the fame of Jesus and now Lazarus was spreading and growing. They make plans to kill Lazarus too. For Jesus, the cross is imminent.

What's this story all about? In this story I think we get an amazing picture of worship. The setting is not a place of formal worship but a place of fellowship, a home. It is at the dinner table, not the temple, that Mary performs her scandalous act of worship. The act of wiping Jesus' feet with her hair is the perfect picture of true worship because Mary takes her rightful place at the feet of Jesus. Three times in Scripture we see Mary at our Lord's feet. She sat at his feet to hear his word (Luke 10:38-42). She knelt at his feet in grief over the death of her brother Lazarus (John 11:32). This time, she places herself at the feet of Jesus and brings him an offering in worship.

### **True worship is about placing ourselves at the feet of Jesus**

True worship is about placing ourselves at the feet of Jesus. Have you been there lately? When's the last time you just sat at the feet of Jesus? Have we been too busy? Too proud? Too self-reliant? What does that even look like?

When I read this story about Mary, I can't help but think of King David. Much like Mary, King David was known as a man who loved God in a lavish manner as well. Look at what he

did in 2 Samuel 6:14-15, "*Wearing a linen ephod, David was dancing before the Lord with all his might, while he and all Israel were bringing up the ark of the Lord with shouts and the sound of trumpets.*" When the Ark of God was being returned to Jerusalem, David was so excited that the Lord's presence was returning to his city that he danced almost naked during the parade. The message and the point is not that we repeat David or Mary's actions. Removing our clothing and dancing before the Lord in our underwear or breaking a bottle of expensive perfume doesn't really fit in our culture like they fit in their cultures. Instead, the message is that we loosen our inhibitions a bit and give ourselves the freedom to respond genuinely from the heart to Jesus.

What does that look like today? There are so many examples of this throughout the Scriptures—painting or building (Exodus 35:33), dancing (Exodus 15:20), giving money away (Mark 12:41-43), serving behind the scenes (Numbers 4:46), writing songs or poetry (Psalm 45:1), reading and thinking (Psalm 119), prayer (Mark 1:35), playing an instrument (Psalm 71:22), and during worship clapping, lifting hands, and bowing low (Psalm 47, 134, 38)—are ways we can express our devotion and love to Jesus while sitting at his feet in worship.

Why don't we view worship like this? What keeps us from placing ourselves at the feet of Jesus? To answer that, let's look at each person at the dinner party, starting first with Judas.

### **Judas**

In response to Mary's lavish gift, Judas says, "What a waste!" He was the type of man who has money on his mind all the time. Judas is a man in disguise, a man with a mask. His worship of Jesus is a masquerade. It's phony and fake. That's how worship can become for us too if we are not careful. I've been to some churches that are stiff and unemotional. No one claps, lifts their hands or even really sings. I've been to other churches that are way too emotional. They love to sing, dance, cry out, jump, and the sermon is usually nothing short of a motivational speech that makes you feel better about yourself. At both types of churches I've noticed people just watching. When we become spectators and watch others worship, we become like Judas. It's like we put a mask on at the door when the worship begins. We try to do what everyone else is doing to fit in and we leave wondering if we ever really worshipped. I've sure done that. There have been many times where I just didn't want to be here and worship. Have you ever felt that way? That's Judas worship. Then there's the crowd.

### **The Crowd**

In verse 9, a large crowd shows up at Simon's house not only to see Jesus but really to see Lazarus. In other words, the party is for Jesus, but most of the people who show up are there

for somebody else. Isn't that often true about our worship as well? Every Sunday we try and throw a party for Jesus here, but often we are showing up for somebody else. That person is usually ourselves. Worship becomes "what's in it for me?" Like the crowd, we want to get something out of worship and if we do, then worship was really good. But, if we leave here today and feel like we didn't really get anything out of worship, then we feel cheated. This perspective is entirely self-centered and it leaves God and the rest of the Body of Christ out of worship. Like the crowd, we show up happy to see Jesus, but really wanting to see Lazarus. Have you ever done that? I sure have. Mary's example shows us that worship isn't about getting something **from** Jesus, although we often do. Worship is about offering something **to** Jesus. Maybe true worship is in what we leave at the feet of Christ and not what he gives us.

### **Mary**

It's Mary, bowed in humility at the feet of Jesus, who shows us the third way. Mary is not afraid to wear her heart on her sleeve before the Lord. She is not afraid to express herself in action. Mary doesn't care what everyone else thinks because she's thought carefully about the significance of what she is doing. Anointing Jesus' feet was not some careless emotional act. She's thought through the decision theologically. So, when Mary comes to Jesus, she leaves her mask at the door. She is vulnerable and transparent in her approach. Mary presented this gift as an

offering of love and gratitude, prompted by Jesus' restoration of her brother to their family. Wiping his feet with her hair was a gesture of utmost devotion and reverence. Mary offers the very best of what she has and places herself at the feet of Jesus. It's a familiar place she has been before.

True worship is about placing ourselves at the feet of Jesus. That means it's not about what we get out of it but what we give. True worship is never cheap; it costs us something of ourselves. True worship exposes us for who we really are. It's laying our souls naked and unashamed before God. It's never just singing songs or listening to a sermon. It's bringing all we are, in response to all Jesus is, and placing ourselves at his feet. John Koessler writes, "That is why every time we cross the sacred threshold of worship, we tread on dangerous ground...Because at any moment, our masks may be torn away and our true motives exposed. We may find ourselves face to face with the Living God. With our pretenses shattered, we may find ourselves next to Mary, on the floor at Jesus' feet with nothing left to offer him. Nothing, except our naked devotion."

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

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