

WILL YOU GIVE A SPECIAL GIFT TO JESUS?

12 Six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, [the village] where Lazarus lived, [the man] whom Jesus had raised from the dead. 2They held a dinner for him there; Martha served and Lazarus was one of those who reclined at the table with him. 3Now Mary took a pint of perfume—pure nard, very expensive—and anointed Jesus' feet, then she wiped his feet with her hair; and the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. 4But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples, [the one] who would betray him, said, 5Why was not this perfume sold for three hundred denarii, and [the proceeds] given to the poor? 6Now he said this, not because he cared for the poor, but because he was a thief; and holding the [money] bag, he took whatever was put into it. 7Then Jesus said, Leave her alone, it was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial. 8You always have the poor among you; but you do not always have me. (Jn. 12:1-8)

14 Now the Passover and the [Feast of] Unleavened Bread were [only] two days away. The chief priests and the scribes were looking for a way to subtly seize [Jesus] and kill him; 2for they said, [We cannot do it] during the feast, or else there may be a riot among the people. 3Now while he was in Bethany at the home of Simon the leper, as he reclined at the table, a woman came with an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume, made of pure nard. She broke the jar and poured the perfume over his head. 4But some who were there reacted with indignation and were saying among themselves, Why has this perfume been wasted? 5This perfume could have been sold for more than three hundred denarii, and [the proceeds] given to the poor. So they were rebuking her. 6But Jesus said, Leave her alone; why are you bothering her? She has done a good deed to me. 7You always have the poor among you, and whenever you desire you can do [something] good for them; but you will not always have me. 8She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for burying. 9I tell you the truth, Wherever the gospel shall be preached throughout the whole world, what this woman has done shall also be told in memory of her. 10Judas Iscariot, who was one of the Twelve, went away to the chief priests, in order to betray him to them. 11They were delighted to hear this and promised to give him money. So he looked for a convenient opportunity to hand him over [to them]. (Mk. 14:1-11)

A note on the Scripture text that accompanies each individual message: The *American Standard Version* and the *New International Version*, along with the original Greek and Hebrew, have been used in an effort to achieve the greatest degree of accuracy and clarity. Where words or phrases have been added to the original text in an effort to better express its meaning, those words or phrases have usually been indicated by means of [brackets].

Introduction

A church in Michigan was receiving a special offering for their building fund. As the deacons passed the offering plates, one little girl named Mary, put in her special offering: a little plastic ring. It was the ring her mother purchased for her the day before—just a little trinket from a vending machine; it cost only twenty-five cents.

But that little plastic ring was precious to Mary. It was a shiny trinket that caught her eye. But more than that, it proved to be the last gift Mary ever received from her mother. Later that same day, Mary's mother died in a fatal house fire. Now, as the offering plate was passed down her row, Mary removed the little plastic ring from her finger and placed it into the plate. After the service, when the deacons tried to return the ring to little Mary, she refused to take it back. It's a special gift of love to Jesus, she explained.

Because Jesus is so very worthy, will we not consider giving Him a special gift? Like Mary did. And like the woman at Bethany did.

I. Will You Give Jesus a Special Gift, because of Your Love for Him? (Jn. 12:3)

While at the village of Bethany, a great feast was held in Jesus' honor; it was served and attended by those who loved Him dearly. It was held in the home of Simon the leper, no doubt a former leper whom Jesus had cleansed of leprosy. Lazarus, the man whom Jesus raised from the dead, was there. Martha, as usual, was actively engaged in preparing and serving the meal. Present also was the woman with the expensive bottle of perfume.

Some time during the dinner, the woman took her bottle of perfume and began to pour it out upon Jesus. Do ladies like perfume? Of course they do, it is something that is very precious to them! Consider this particular bottle of perfume. It was a very large bottle of perfume, the equivalent of twelve fluid ounces. It was also a very precious and costly perfume. It is described as being *"pure nard;"* a very exotic perfume, imported from India. This would be especially precious to a peasant girl living in a little Judean village. It may have been a family heirloom, passed down from mother to daughter; it may have been a gift from some special admirer. According to Judas' estimate, this bottle of perfume was worth three hundred denarii; an amount of money almost the equivalent of a year's wages. In Jesus' parable, the landowner *"agreed to pay [the workers] a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard"* (Matt. 20:2.) A special gift for Jesus should involve the giving of something that is very precious to us personally (maybe our time, or a special talent, or even some special possession); note David's testimony in 2 Samuel 24:24, *"I will not sacrifice to Jehovah my God burnt offerings that cost me nothing."*

The woman did not give of this precious perfume sparingly; on the contrary, she poured it out lavishly upon Jesus. According to Mark 14:3, she began by pouring it over Jesus' head, and then proceeded to anoint His body, finally coming to His feet (according to Jn. 12:3.) John especially emphasizes the anointing of Jesus' feet. In the ancient Middle East it was the custom to anoint a guest, and not to do so was a mark of discourtesy. On one occasion, when He had been invited to dinner at a Pharisee's home, Jesus rebuked the man for his lack of courtesy:

Then [Jesus] turned toward the woman and said to Simon, Do you see this woman? I came into your house. You did not give me any water for my feet, but she wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. ⁴⁵You did not give me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet. ⁴⁶You did not put oil on my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet. (Lk. 7:44-46)

But the anointing oil was customarily poured out upon the guest's head, not his feet. Furthermore, to attend to the guest's feet was a task reserved for a very menial household servant if the householder had one, else it was the task of the guest himself. Thus this woman, (whom John tells us was Mary,) undertakes an act that goes far beyond the mere display of etiquette: it transforms etiquette into a display of self-forgetting love and devotion.

Having lavishly poured out this costly perfume upon the Lord Jesus, Mary now proceeds to wipe His feet **with her hair**. The use of her hair, rather than a towel, further reveals the extent of Mary's self-giving and self-forgetting love; as well as her personal involvement: she is not only giving the best that she has to Jesus, she is giving herself to Him. Actually, it was unheard of for a Jewish lady to unloosen her hair in public; to do so was a sign of loose morals. In her love for Jesus, Mary forgot all about herself and her own dignity and status.

A special gift for Jesus should involve the giving of ourselves, even if it means the sacrificing of our status—perhaps by reaching out and befriending an unattractive and even undesirable co-worker or neighbor for Jesus' sake, perhaps by standing up for an unpopular, but righteous, cause for Jesus' sake.

II. Will You Give a Special Gift to Jesus, even though It may be Misunderstood? (Jn. 12:4-5)

Mary's loving act of devotion, which fills the whole house with its sweet fragrance (according to John 12:3,) is suddenly and insensitively interrupted by Judas Iscariot (Jn. 12:4.) Judas has no sensitivity nor appreciation for this act of love; he is blind and hard and cold towards it. Judas is shocked by Mary's incomprehensible act of devotion. No doubt he frantically seized the almost empty bottle of perfume, as he raised his indignant cry, "*Why was not this perfume sold for three hundred denarii, and [the proceeds] given to the poor?*"

This appears to be a marvelous display of **practical** piety and concern on the part of Judas: Don't waste this expensive perfume! Convert it into cold hard cash! Then put that money to some practical and worthy use! Just think of how many needy people could be fed or clothed! Our special gift or act of devotion to Jesus may be rebuked on what may appear to be sound and reasonable grounds, as was the case of Mary in her act of loving giving to Jesus.

In reality, however, Judas' protest was nothing more than a piece of hypocritical cunning. Judas had no concern for the poor (Jn. 12:6.) What's more, Judas was a thief. Being the treasurer of Jesus' band of disciples, he could and he did help himself to whatever money Jesus and His disciples may have had in their possession. When Judas saw good money being wasted (in his estimate,) money that he could get his hands on for himself, it was more than he could take, he could not stand by and allow this to happen unchallenged.

Whenever we imitate Mary in giving a special and precious gift to Jesus, we should not be surprised to find such an act being despised and disparaged by the insensitive and the selfish. Because it is a self-giving act, it will appear foolish to the selfish and self-centered. If it is also a self-abasing act (as was this act on the part of Mary,) one in which we lay aside our dignity and status, it will be loathsome to the proud.

Mark goes to some trouble to make us appreciate the contrast between Mary's special act of loving devotion and the malicious plottings of Judas and the chief priests. Luke tells us that the plottings of the chief priests were immediately followed by Judas' desertion:

Now the Feast of Unleavened Bread, called the Passover, was approaching,² and the chief priests and the teachers of the law were looking for some way to get rid of Jesus, for they were afraid of the people.³ Then Satan entered Judas, called Iscariot, one of the Twelve.⁴ And Judas went to the chief priests and the officers of the temple guard and discussed with them how he might betray Jesus.⁵ They were delighted and agreed to give him money.⁶ He consented, and watched for an opportunity to hand Jesus over to them when no crowd was present. (Lk. 22:1-6)

John informs us that the anointing at Bethany took place six days before the Passover (Jn. 12:1,) i.e.; it took place six days before the bargain between Judas and the chief priests. Thus Mark informs us of the plotting of the chief priests (Mk. 14:1-2,) then gives us a "flashback" to the anointing that occurred at Bethany (Mk. 14:3-9,) and then goes on to inform us of Judas' desertion and bargain (Mk. 14:10-11.) Mark is intentionally highlighting the fact that when we give a special gift to Jesus we will stand out in sharp contrast to the selfishness all around us, as was true with regard to Mary and her loving, self-giving gift to Jesus.

III. Will You Give a Special Gift to Jesus, Knowing that Jesus will surely Acknowledge It? (Jn. 12:7-8)

Jesus instructs Judas and His other disciples to leave Mary alone. Is it ever possible for us to be too extravagant in our love for the Lord Jesus, considering what He has done for us? Consider Philippians 2:6-8, a passage of Scripture that reveals the awesome extent of Jesus' self-giving love for us:

... existing in the form of God, he did not consider the being on an equality with God a thing to be exploited for his own sake, ⁷but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being made in the likeness of men; ⁸and being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself, becoming obedient even unto death, indeed, the death of the cross. (Phil. 2:6-8)

The Apostle Paul prays that our love for Christ would abound more and more,) *“And this I pray, that your love [for Christ, for His cause, for His people, but most of all for Christ Himself] may abound still more and more in knowledge and all discernment”* (Phil. 1:9.) This love is what Christ desires from us and it is well pleasing to Him. Consider our Lord’s words to the church of Ephesus, a church that had departed from its love for Christ: *“I have this against you: You have left your first love. ⁵Therefore, remember from where you have fallen, and repent, and do the works [you did] at the beginning”* (Rev. 2:4-5a.)

Jesus announces that Mary, in her act of love, has pre-anointed His body for burial (Mk. 14:8.) Mary’s act of pouring out her perfume is a most fitting illustration of how Jesus is about to pour out His life for us and for our salvation. Mary’s act of love is a most fitting response to the soul-saving sacrifice of Christ Jesus: *“he died for all, so that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again”* (2 Cor. 5:15.)

Jesus solemnly declares that Mary shall be remembered and honored for her special gift of love (Mk. 14:9.) In conjunction with this promise our Lord makes to Mary, note a similar promise the Apostle Paul makes on Christ’s behalf to all who perform acts of loving service and devotion to Him:

... judge nothing before the [appointed] time, wait until the Lord comes. He will bring to light the things hidden in darkness and will reveal the intentions of the hearts, and then each one shall receive from God the praise [he deserves]. (1 Cor. 4:5)

In this particular passage *“the things hidden in the darkness”* are the righteous deeds done for Christ, deeds that went unnoticed and unrewarded in this present world. This becomes evident from the fact that when these particular *“things hidden in the darkness”* are brought to light, they do not receive condemnation; rather, they *“shall receive from God the praise.”* In the same way, *“the intentions of the hearts”* are the godly desires and ambitions to serve Christ which, due to the providence of God, the Christian was unable to carry out—even those unfulfilled desires of Christian service will receive their reward.

Conclusion

Because Jesus is so very worthy, let us consider how we may give Him a special gift. It may be a gift of our time: to serve the Lord on some church committee; to attend or host a Bible study; to teach in the Sunday School; to visit the lonely or those in the

hospital. It may be a gift of our talent or the use of our spiritual gift: musical or artistic talent; the gift of teaching; the gift of hospitality; or whatever other spiritual gift we may have received from the Lord. It may be a gift of our money: a special gift for the work of missions; a special financial gift to a brother or neighbor in need. It may be a gift of ourselves: visiting a nursing home or hospital in the name of Jesus; paying a call on the bereaved for Jesus' sake; befriending a lonely neighbor or newcomer for Jesus' sake.