

In Bethany

by J.C. Ryle

The sermon emphasizes the importance of faith, love, and gratitude towards Christ, and warns against the dangers of hardness and unbelief.

Scripture: John 12:1

Topics: "Faith and Unbelief", "Sacrifice for Christ"

Description

J.C. Ryle emphasizes the profound significance of the events in Bethany, where Lazarus, raised from the dead, shares a meal with Jesus, showcasing the undeniable evidence of Christ's miracles. He highlights Mary's extravagant act of anointing Jesus' feet with costly oil as a demonstration of love and gratitude, contrasting it with Judas Iscariot's hypocritical criticism, which reflects the hardness of human hearts. Ryle warns against the skepticism and unkindness that often accompany faith, urging believers to remain steadfast in their devotion despite criticism. He also points out the persistent presence of poverty and the futility of expecting its complete eradication, reminding us that true faith is evidenced by our actions and sacrifices for Christ. Ultimately, Ryle calls for vigilance against the dangers of unbelief, as exemplified by Judas, and encourages believers to cultivate genuine faith.

Transcript

"Then, six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, where Lazarus was who had been dead, whom He had raised from the dead. There they made Him a supper; and Martha served, but Lazarus was one of those who sat at the table with Him. Then Mary 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. 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 bag; 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. For the poor you have with you always, but Me you do not have always.' Now a great many of the Jews knew that he was there; and they came, not for Jesus' sake only, but that they might also see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. But the chief priests plotted to put Lazarus to death also." (John 12:1-10)

The chapter we have now begun finishes a most important division of St. John's Gospel. Our Lord's public addresses to the unbelieving Jews of Jerusalem are here brought to an end. After this chapter, St. John records nothing but what was said in private to the disciples.

We see, for one thing, in this passage, what abounding proofs exist of the truth of our Lord's greatest miracles. We read of a supper at Bethany, where Lazarus sat at the table among the guests--Lazarus, who had been publicly raised from the dead after lying four days in the grave. No one could pretend to say that his resurrection was a mere optical delusion and that the eyes of the bystanders must have been deceived by a ghost or vision. Here was the very same Lazarus, after several weeks, sitting among his fellow men with a real material body and eating and drinking real material food. It is hard to understand what stronger evidence of a fact could be supplied. He that is not convinced by such evidence as this may as well say that he is determined to believe nothing at all.

It is a comfortable thought that the very same proofs which exist about the resurrection of Lazarus are the proofs which surround that still mightier fact, the resurrection of Christ from the dead. Was Lazarus seen for several weeks by the people of Bethany, going in and coming out among them? So was the Lord Jesus seen by his disciples. Did Lazarus take material food before the eyes of his friends? So did the Lord Jesus eat and drink before his ascension. No one, in his sober senses, who saw Jesus take "broiled fish and a honeycomb" and eat it before several witnesses would doubt that he had a real body.

We shall do well to remember this. In an age of abounding unbelief and scepticism, we shall find that the resurrection of Christ will bear any weight that we can lay upon it. Just as he placed beyond reasonable doubt the rising again of a beloved disciple within two miles of Jerusalem, so in a very few weeks he placed beyond doubt his own victory over the grave. If we believe that Lazarus rose again, we need not doubt that Jesus rose again also. If we believe that Jesus rose again, we need not doubt the truth of his Messiahship, the reality of his acceptance as our mediator, and the certainty of our own resurrection. Christ has risen indeed, and wicked men may well tremble. Christ has risen from the dead, and believers may well rejoice.

We see, for another thing, in this passage, what unkindness and discouragement Christ's friends sometimes meet with from man. We read that at the supper in Bethany, Mary, the sister of Lazarus, anointed the feet of Jesus with precious ointment and wiped them with the hair of her head. This action was not an uncommon one in Eastern countries where the heat is very great, and the feet exposed to it by wearing sandals are liable to suffer much from dryness and scorching. Nor was this ointment poured on with a stingy hand. She did it so liberally and profusely that "the house was filled with the odor of the ointment." She did it under the influence of a heart full of love and gratitude. She thought nothing too great and good to bestow on such a Savior. Sitting at his feet in days gone by and hearing his words, she had found peace for her conscience and pardon for her sins. At this very moment she saw Lazarus alive and well, sitting by her Master's side. Greatly loved, she thought she could not show too much love in return. Having freely received, she freely gave.

But there were some present who found fault with Mary's conduct and blamed her as guilty of wasteful extravagance. One especially, an apostle, a man of whom better things might have been expected, declared openly that the ointment would have been better employed if it had been sold and the price given to the poor. This carping is a specimen of the way in which wicked men often try to depreciate a good action, and especially in the matter of giving money. The more wicked and graceless people are, the more ready they are to find fault and blame others, seeing no beauty in what they do. The heart which could conceive such thoughts must have had low views of the dignity of Christ's person, and still lower views of our obligations to him. A cold heart and a stingy hand will generally go together.

There are only too many professing Christians of a like spirit in the present day. Myriads of baptized people cannot understand zeal of any sort for the honor of Christ. Tell them of any vast outlay of money to push trade or to advance the cause of science, and they approve of it as right and wise. Tell them of any expense incurred for the preaching of the Gospel at home or abroad, for spreading God's Word, for extending the knowledge of Christ on earth, and they tell you plainly that they think it a waste. They never give a penny to such causes as these and count those people fools who do. Worst of all, they often cover over their own backwardness to help purely Christian causes by a pretended concern for the poor at home.

It is clear from our text that poverty will always exist: "The poor always will be with you." So long as human nature is what it is, some will always be rich and some poor, because some are diligent and some idle, some strong and some weak, and some wise and some foolish. We need never dream that by any arrangement, either civil or ecclesiastical, poverty can ever be entirely prevented. The existence of pauperism is no proof whatever that states are ill-governed or that churches are not doing their duty.

We must never allow ourselves to be moved from "patient continuance in well-doing" by the unkind remarks of such people. It is vain to expect a man to do much for Christ when he has no sense of debt to Christ. We must pity the blindness of our unkind critics and work on. He who pleaded the cause of loving Mary and said, "Let her alone," is sitting at the right hand of God and keeps a book of remembrance. A day is soon coming when a wondering world will see that every cup of cold water given for Christ's sake, as well as every box of precious ointment, was recorded in heaven and has its rewards. In that great day, those who thought that anyone could give too much to Christ will find that it were better if they had never been born.

We see, lastly, in this passage, what desperate hardness and unbelief there is in the heart of man. Unbelief appears in the chief priests, who "consulted that they might put Lazarus to death." They could not deny the fact of his having been raised again. Living and moving, eating and drinking within two miles of Jerusalem after lying four days in the grave, Lazarus was a witness to the truth of Christ's Messiahship and one whom they could not possibly answer or put to silence. Yet these proud men would not give way. They would rather commit a murder than throw down the arms of rebellion and confess themselves in the wrong. No wonder that the Lord Jesus in a certain place "marveled" at unbelief. Well might he say, in a well-known parable, "If they believe not Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rose from the dead."

Hardness appears in Judas Iscariot, who, after being a chosen Apostle and a preacher of the kingdom of heaven, turns out at last a thief and a traitor. So long as the world stands, this unhappy man will be a lasting proof of the depth of human corruption. That any one could follow Christ as a disciple for three years, see all his miracles, hear all his teaching, receive at his hand repeated kindnesses, be counted an Apostle and yet prove rotten at heart in the end, appears incredible and impossible! Yet the case of Judas shows plainly that the thing can be. Few things, perhaps, are so little realized as the extent of the fall of man.

Let us thank God if we know anything of faith and can say with all our sense of weakness and infirmity, "I believe." Let us pray that our faith may be real, true, genuine, and sincere and not a mere temporary impression, like the morning cloud and the early dew. Not least, let us watch and pray against the love of the world. It ruined one who basked in the full sunshine of privileges and heard Christ himself teaching every day. Then "let him that thinks he stands take heed lest he fall."

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