

John's Gospel - Loving Jesus

by John Vissers

Following Jesus involves loving and serving Him in personal and extravagant ways, not just in practical ways.

Duration: 34:33

Scripture: Matthew 6:33, Luke 10:38-42, John 11:43-44, John 12:1-6, Revelation 2:4

Topics: "Jesus"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker discusses the different ways in which people express their love for Jesus. Some express it through intellectual pursuits, others through artistic and emotional means, and some through their work or giving. The speaker emphasizes that at the heart of it all, the key is to have a love for Jesus Christ. The sermon then focuses on the story of Mary anointing Jesus' feet with expensive perfume, highlighting the extravagant nature of her act of devotion. The speaker encourages the audience to reflect on what it truly means to love Jesus and have a passionate and intimate relationship with Him.

Transcript

Tonight we return to the Gospel of John and I invite you to turn to the 12th chapter where we're going to read verses 1 to 11. One of the most moving passages in some ways that we find in the Gospel of John as Jesus is anointed at Bethany by Mary. So let us hear God's word.

Six days before the Passover, Jesus arrived at 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 table with him.

Then Mary took about a pint of pure nard and 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 meant 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 putting their faith in him. Amen.

May God bless to us this reading from his word tonight. Let's bow in prayer, shall we? Father, we thank you tonight for your word, which is a light to our path, a lamp to our feet, we thank you for your inspired holy word this night and pray that you would speak to us through it, not just things that we might learn, but things that might make a difference in our lives, in our walk with you. And so by faith, we reach out to you this evening and pray that by your spirit, you would speak to us through your word in the name of Christ our savior.

Amen. As we come to this passage in John's gospel tonight in the 12th chapter, I want to suggest to you that it introduces us to a model of discipleship, to a model of what it means to follow Jesus, to a model of what it means to serve Jesus that we don't often think about or that we don't often notice in the Bible. When we think about the idea of following Jesus and when we think about the idea of discipleship, our thoughts usually immediately turn to things like the cost of discipleship or the rugged nature of following Jesus, the fighting of the good fight.

We think about the text denying self and taking up the cross and following Jesus. But in John chapter 12, I want to suggest to you tonight that we are introduced to a different kind of model of discipleship, to a different kind of way of understanding what it means to follow Jesus. That discipleship also has to do with loving Jesus.

That following Jesus also has to do with loving Jesus. And we Presbyterians are usually quite good at the first model of discipleship. But have we really reflected on what it means to love Jesus, what it really means to have a passion for him, to have an intimate relationship with him, to love him.

Now the setting of this passage as we come to it this evening is the week before the cross. And Jesus arrives in Bethany where a dinner was being given in his honor. And we read that Martha was serving this dinner and we know from other passages in the Gospels that Martha was the more practical one and she got about the business of making sure that the meal was ready.

And so she served the meal and Lazarus was also present. This is John chapter 12. Lazarus has been raised from the dead in John chapter 11.

And we read that Lazarus also sat at table with Jesus. And while this is unfolding, what we discover is that in an act of moving devotion, Mary approaches Jesus and pours some expensive perfume on his feet. And that Mary then uses her hair to wipe the feet of our Lord.

And it says the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. And if you just think about the picture for a moment, this beautiful, devotional, in many ways majestic picture of Mary showing her love, expressing her devotion for her Lord. But it doesn't take long before someone raises an objection.

And as we read the text, Judas raises an objection and wants to know why the perfume wasn't sold. Why this expensive perfume wasn't sold and why the money wasn't collected from that sale and given for use among the poor. We read it was worth about a year's wages.

And John, the gospel writer, makes a comment here. He says Judas didn't say this because he was really interested in the poor, but he said it because he was in charge of the money bag. John describes Judas then as the one who is going to betray Jesus.

And as John chapter 13 and 14 unfold, we begin to see that story told. And Judas is described here as a thief, as someone who helped himself regularly to the treasury of the disciples. And the cash from the sale of this perfume no doubt would have added nicely to his account.

But then notice that Jesus immediately jumps to Mary's defense. The perfume was supposed to be saved for the day of Jesus' burial. And Jesus says you will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me.

Well, I want to suggest to you tonight that this example, this model, this experience which is unfolded for us here in John chapter 12 really represents a model of what it means to serve Jesus in every generation. A model of what it means to follow Jesus. A model of what it means to love Jesus.

That Mary's action arose out of her heart for her Lord, out of her passion for Christ, out of her love for Jesus. And I'd like this evening just briefly to look at a few of the characteristics of that love, the kind of love that she expresses here, the kind of model of worship and the kind of model of service, the kind of model of discipleship that is unfolded for us in this passage. First of all, I want you to notice this, that the most noticeable quality really of Mary's action was that it was extravagant.

It was extravagant. We need to understand that Mary took, it says, about a half a liter of nard and poured it on the feet of Jesus. Now, nard was an oil-like perfume and it was extracted from the root and from the spike of the nard plant which was grown in India.

It was imported, in other words, and you need to understand that this was not some cut-rate perfume that Mary would have bought at the bargain bin in some store in Bethany. This was expensive. This was not one of the lower quality.

This was an expensive perfume and the text says that it was worth about the annual salary of an above-average wage earner. Now, I want you to think about that. Think about what you make in a year and think about all that you can do with what you make in about a year, a year of your salary, all that you do with that amount of money.

You pay your mortgage or you pay your rent, you put food on the table, you buy clothes, you look after your transportation, you look after family, all the things that are covered with one year's salary. That's what Mary poured out for her master here, it says in this text. And Judas, of course, notices that this is extravagant and he suggests that it's wasteful, that something cheaper should have been used and that perhaps they could have sold this and used the money for something that he thought might be more appropriate.

And that's the apparent reason that Judas objected to what Mary had done. The perfume could have been sold and the money used to help the poor. And I think as we think about this, of course, many of us at first glance would tend to sympathize with Judas.

Had we been there, we might well have made the same objection and the other Gospels indicate that some of the other disciples also objected to what Mary had done, that they criticized this action which Mary had undertaken. Don't we see enough waste? Isn't this extravagant? Isn't this overdoing it? Can't we

use this for something else? After all, we're barely eking out a living as we follow Jesus and there are so many needs out there. Shouldn't this extravagant and wasteful gift be used for something else? And in fact, don't we often think that way, that we see enough waste in the name of religion? But I want you to notice that in this passage, the extravagance of Mary is approved.

And it's not only approved, but it's honored. John, of course, helps us understand that the objection of Judas does not arise from a pure heart. He simply wants to sell the Nard so that he'll have control over yet still more money as treasurer of the group, that his intentions, his motivations are not pure, that he doesn't really want to help the poor.

And of course, that reminds us that when we begin to think the way that Judas thinks, we always need to check our own attitudes and our own actions in this regard. Are we acting consistently with the objection that we are raising? But beyond that, Jesus is not teaching in this passage that the disciples, his disciples, and that to be a disciple of Jesus means that we have no obligations to the poor. In fact, if you look at the wider context of Jesus' teaching, we begin to discover, of course, that we do have just such an obligation.

Those who follow Jesus are to share generously with those in need. But this act of Mary is honored. And this act of Mary is approved because it is appropriate, because it reflects the love of God.

And it's as it mirrors and reflects the extravagant love of God, as Mary reflects that love back to her Lord, it's also the reality that that kind of love leads to real love and real action on behalf of others. We need to understand that Jesus is only days away from the cross at this point. And indeed, Jesus says that this perfume was intended for the day of his burial.

Jesus is being anointed by Mary before his death. And Jesus, within days, will be giving his life, his body will be broken, his blood will be shed for the sins of the world. And this is Jesus' all-consuming passion.

His focus is the cross. He's going to fulfill the work that his Father has called him to do, that his Father has given him to do. He's going to complete the mission on which the Father has sent him.

And Jesus receives this love and receives this extravagant gift as an act of consecration for the mission that is about to be undertaken. And in that sense, the extravagance of the perfume in the eyes of Jesus is entirely appropriate because it points, and I think John wants us to understand this, John the Gospel writer, it points to the costly love of God. It points to the extravagant grace of God.

For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life. The gift of God, the extravagant love of God revealed on the cross. Or Romans chapter 6, the wages of sin is death but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

The Gospel at the very center of the Gospel is this extravagant love, this giving of God. The cross is costly, the love of God is extravagant, the grace of God is poured out freely and without measure upon us. The mercy of Jesus flows freely through our lives.

And when we begin to understand Mary's extravagance and Mary's gift and Mary's love for her Lord in this way, we realize why Jesus rebukes Judas. He's rejecting here a false dichotomy between the spiritual on the one hand and the material on the other as there's some sort of competing loyalty here. He says you don't have to choose between loving me and helping the poor.

In fact, the poor you will always have with you but I will not always be with you. And the deeper point is this that beneath the cross, in the context of the cross, in the framework of the cross, in the framework of God's gift of his son on the cross, everything takes on new meaning. And the cross of Jesus must control every aspect of the disciple's life.

And so Mary's love for Jesus, this extravagant love, is a reflection of Jesus' love for her. She's experienced this love, she knows this love, and she wants to pour it out on her Savior. It's interesting to see on the one hand the passion of Mary for her Lord and the parsimony of Judas on the other hand.

And so the cross is where we come to know the extravagant love of God. This is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us and gave his son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. The cross, the gift of God's love in Jesus Christ, is where we begin to understand what it means to love our Lord and how we ought to share that love with one another and how we ought to share that love in the world in which we find ourselves.

You see that extravagant love this evening, not just the extravagant love of Mary for her Lord, but that extravagant love, that extravagant gift in response to God's love and grace and mercy to us. And how do we respond? Are we extravagant? Are we lavish? Are we willing to pour out upon our Lord all that we are and all that we have? Are we willing to love Jesus in the way that Mary loved Jesus? But secondly, I want you to notice that this action by Mary was not just extravagant, but it was exceedingly personal, exceedingly personal. Mary's love for Jesus, I want you to notice, was expressed in a very personal way.

Notice what she does after she pours this expensive perfume out on the feet of Jesus. She very humbly unties her hair and she wipes his feet with her hair. Now you need to understand that this was a very surprising act.

A woman in the first century would not usually untie her hair in public, but Mary here wants to express her love for Jesus in this very informal and in this very personal way. Mary, as we understand her in the Gospels, is someone who's a very humble spirit, someone who's come to experience the grace of Jesus in her life, someone who's come to understand the love of Christ, the redemption of Christ in her life, and she submits herself to Jesus. In order to anoint Jesus' feet, she assumed a posture of subservience.

In fact, it's very interesting that three times in the Gospels, Mary is mentioned in relation to the feet of Jesus. In Luke chapter 10 and verse 39, she sat at the Lord's feet, it says, to listen to his teaching. And in John chapter 11 verse 32, she fell at his feet to indicate her absolute dependence upon her Lord.

And now in John chapter 12 and verse 3, she anoints the feet of Jesus to express her devotion. I want to suggest to you that true love for Jesus, truly loving Jesus is a very personal act. It's a very personal reality.

It strikes at the very core, at the very center of who we are. It is intimate. It is powerful.

It is at the very center of our relationship with Jesus Christ. As we spend time with him in prayer, as we enter into his presence and meditate on his word, as we gather with his people, as we express our love for Christ, it is a very personal reality. It is expressed in this kind of humility, this kind of dependence, that true service for Jesus springs from a wholehearted commitment to him as Lord.

Mary sat at his feet and listened to his teaching. Do we love Jesus in that way, to sit humbly at his feet, to listen to his teaching? Mary indicated her dependence upon her Lord, her absolute dependence, that her life, all that she was, depended upon who he was and what he had done for her. She sat at his feet.

Do we sit at the feet of our Lord and indicate that absolute dependence, that all that we are, all that we do, day by day, the very center of our being, daily living, is dependence upon our Lord Jesus Christ? And she now sits, bows, kneels at the feet of her Lord and expresses her love. Do we express our love for Jesus in that way? Last year, I preached through the letters to the seven churches. And do you remember the letter to the first church in Revelation chapter two, the letter to the church in Ephesus? The apostle John there writing, and on behalf of the Lord Jesus Christ, through this vision that John has received in Revelation chapter two, verse four, he tells the Christians there something very interesting.

He says, you know, you've got your doctrine right. You're busy in the activity of the Lord. You're persevering in the work of the kingdom.

You're doing all of these things that are right and that are good. Your faith and your life in many ways are to be commended. But I have this against you.

You have lost your first love. You have lost your first love. You have lost your passion for me.

And what we have here in John chapter 12 is a marvelous picture of a woman, Mary, who had not lost her first love, who had that passion for Christ. And in this way, she models what ought to be true of all believers, that it's not just a matter of believing the right things. It's not just a matter of doing the right things as important as faith and action are.

And we can never underestimate them. But beneath it all and over it all and around it all is the reality of this personal love for Jesus Christ, which comes as you understand and experience that you yourself are loved by Jesus. And I find in my work as a pastor and as a teacher today that this is something that men and women and young people and children within the church and even beyond need to come and understand and experience in a fresh way.

That at the heart of the Christian faith is this love for Jesus Christ, being loved by Him and loving Him. Last week, Dr. D'Gangi preached on John 21, that marvelous post-resurrection, post-Easter experience where three times Jesus asks Peter a very profound question. Three times Peter had denied Jesus.

Three times Peter is asked by Jesus, do you love me? Do you love me? Do you love me? And isn't that the question that Jesus standing in our midst tonight would ask us? Do we really love our Lord Jesus Christ? And there may be many different ways in which we express that love for our Lord. We're not all the same. In fact, one of the reasons that Judas is rebuked is that he attempts to disqualify this love that Mary has for her Lord.

Judas tries to interrupt this and disqualify what she is doing as somehow inappropriate and illegitimate, not a true expression of love for Jesus. We need to understand that Christians express their love for Jesus in different ways. And Jesus here has granted a generous framework within which we can understand that.

Some of us are pragmatic and practical. Some of us are intellectual. Some of us are more emotional and artistic and sensitive.

Some of us express our love primarily in the work that we do for the cause of the gospel. And some of us express our love for Jesus in the way that we give our time and our money. And some of us express our love most fully through prayer and worship.

The point is that in it all and through it all and at the heart of it all and at the center of it all is to be this love for Jesus Christ. How do you express your love for Jesus? What is the way in which you express that love, that personal reality, that personal relationship? And then thirdly and finally, I want to suggest to you tonight that Mary's action here, Mary's act of devotion, Mary's love for Jesus was timely. It was timely.

You see, Mary seems here to have touched a nerve within Jesus. She somehow seems to perceive the mind of Christ, that Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem, that he's about to undergo the cross, the suffering, death itself, that Jesus was soon to be immersed in the chill of dark waters. And so when she breaks out this expensive perfume, it somehow seems right.

It somehow seems appropriate. As we've already noted, it was intended that the perfume be kept to anoint Jesus' body in death. And what Jesus says to Judas in a rather enigmatic way is, this is the moment.

It has come. This which was set aside for my death now is to be used because my death is imminent. And one can only imagine the chill that went over the conversation in that dinner party when Jesus intimated this reality.

Had Mary kept it for another time, the opportunity would have passed. Mary seized the moment and worshipped her Lord. She expressed her love for Jesus, even though somehow to others it seemed inappropriate.

Jesus knew that it was the time, that the time had come. I want to suggest to you that being a disciple of Jesus and expressing our love for Jesus often has to do with doing the right thing at the right time in the right way. You know, most of us are pretty good at doing the right thing, but we sometimes do it at the wrong time, or we do the wrong thing and we do it at the right time, or we do the right thing at the right time in the wrong way.

But here, Mary appropriately and in a very timely way expresses her love for her Lord. And our service for Jesus and our love for Jesus and our devotion for Jesus and our worship of Jesus is not something that we can put off. We tend to manage our love for Jesus around our own schedules.

We're good at that. We tend to have this little compartment in our lives where we have Jesus and where we have that love for Jesus and we kind of look after that at certain points in our day or certain points in our week. But the reality is that all of our time, all that we are, ought to belong to our Lord.

The Bible reminds us that life is full of uncertainties. We don't even know what will happen tomorrow. Today is the day to love Jesus.

Now is the moment to love Jesus. Today is the day to serve our Lord. Or in the words of Jesus himself, we must work the works of him who sent me while it is day.

Night comes when no one can work. Now is the time to love our Lord Jesus Christ. Mary's love for Jesus was extravagant.

Judas, on the other hand, was parsimonious. Mary's love for Jesus was personal. Judas, on the other hand, seems to want to have kept Jesus at arm's length.

And Mary's love was timely, while Judas' relationship with Jesus was very untimely. Mary stayed with Jesus to the cross and through to the empty tomb. Judas betrayed Jesus, and some of the other disciples,

all of the other disciples fled.

Peter denied. But here we have an example of someone who followed Jesus, who committed to Jesus, who loved Jesus, who gave her all to Jesus, and who stuck with Jesus right through to the end. My question for you this evening is simply this.

Do you have that kind of love for Jesus? Are you that kind of a disciple of Jesus? Will you love Jesus right through to the end? Do you know him in a personal way? Do you have a personal relationship with him? Not some vague, abstract relationship, but a real intimate and personal relationship with him. Do you love him not just tomorrow, but today, day by day, as you walk through the midst of life? You see, Mary's love provides us with an important model of what it means to love Jesus. And at the very heart of it, it points us to the way in which God loves us, for God's love for us is extravagant.

God's love for us is personal. God loves you, not you in the abstract, but you as his child, as his son, as his daughter. And God's love for you is timely.

He is with you through it all. After his death, the following letter was found among the correspondents of C.S. Lewis. It was a copy of a letter that he'd written to a little girl named Ruth.

It's a very simple letter, but rather beautiful. This is what he said. He said, Dear Ruth, many thanks for your kind letter, and it was very good of you to write and tell me that you like my books, and what a very good letter writer you are for your age.

I'm so thankful that you realize the hidden story in the Narnian books. It is odd. Children nearly always do, grown-ups hardly ever.

I'm afraid that the Narnian series has come to an end, and I'm sorry to tell you that you can expect no more. And then Lewis ends this short, simple, lovely letter to this little girl with these words. If you continue to love Jesus, nothing much can go wrong with you, and I hope you may always do so.

God bless you. Yours sincerely, C.S. Lewis. If you continue to love Jesus, nothing much can go wrong with you, and I hope you may always do so.

May that be our heart's desire. May that be our heart's prayer this evening. Let us pray.

Lord, tonight we want to bow in your presence as Mary did so many years ago, and we simply want to say how much we love you, Lord. From the depths of our hearts and from the depths of our soul, we want to say how much we love you. We want to thank you for your love.

We pray that we tonight might experience afresh and anew that we are loved by the living God, by the one who has come in the person of his Son, Jesus, that you, Lord Jesus, love us, and that by the power of your Spirit, the bond of love, the reality of that love is expressed and experienced in our hearts. And so we just say, thank you, Lord, for loving us and help us by the strength of your Spirit to love you as we ought. In the name of Jesus we pray.

Amen.

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