

WHY WASN'T THIS SOLD?

John 12:1-11

As the time approached leading up to the arrest, trial and execution of Jesus, we find Jesus and His disciples spending less time in Galilee and more time in the area around Jerusalem. The things Jesus did such as healing a man blind from birth or teaching in the temple area caused so much concern among the Jewish leaders that plans were implemented to eliminate Him. These plans included efforts to discredit Him with contrived questions such as “should we pay taxes to Caesar” or “should the woman caught in adultery be stoned.” Things really intensified after the resurrection of Lazarus.

Knowing what the religious leaders were planning to do, Jesus left Bethany with his disciples and went to the nearby city of Ephraim (John 11:54). We learn from Luke’s gospel account that He and His disciples returned to Jerusalem by way of Jericho where Jesus encountered Zacchaeus. From there, Jesus then went back to Bethany which is where Lazarus lived along with his sisters Mary and Martha.

Honored – 12:1-3

¹ Six days before the Passover, Jesus therefore came to Bethany, where Lazarus was, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. ² So they gave a dinner for him there. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those reclining with him at table. ³ 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. John 12:1-3 (ESV)

This event is included in three gospel accounts – Matthew, Mark, and John. John specifically noted that the time was six days prior to the start of Passover which would be before the Triumphal Entry that happened on the first day of the week of the Crucifixion. The accounts of Matthew and Mark do not always have events in the proper chronological order. Knowing the time of this event gives us some insight into the betrayal of Christ by Judas. This significance will be seen later in our study.

Luke’s gospel does not include this account but has a similar event that happened much earlier in the Galilee area at the home of Simon the Pharisee (Luke 7:36-50). The woman in Capernaum was a person who had previously lived an openly sinful life whom Jesus had helped which is very different from what we know about Mary the sister of Martha and Lazarus.

According to the accounts of this supper in Bethany recorded in Matthew and Mark, the setting for this supper was in the home of Simon who (most commentaries assume) had been healed of leprosy. Simon was a fairly common name among the Jews so there is no need to attempt to connect these two accounts. Only John’s Gospel records that Lazarus, Martha, and Mary were also present and that Martha was taking on her usual role of serving. John’s Gospel, however, did not mention that this was the home of Simon. Some commentators speculate that Simon (the leper) was a relative of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus and may have been the father of these three.

This speculation seems very plausible considering that Martha was “serving” as was noted in an earlier account of Jesus being in the home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus in Bethany as recorded by Luke in chapter ten.

Sometime during this visit while Jesus and His disciples were reclining at the “table,” Mary took a container of perfume and poured it on Jesus. Matthew and Mark stated that “a woman” poured it on His head while the Gospel of John states that the substance was poured on His feet by Mary. Apparently, the entire content of the container was emptied. According to John, the scent of the perfume filled the house and, of course, everyone noticed what she had

done. Matthew and Mark do not mention this detail.

Now we know that it was Mary who poured the aromatic oil (what) on Jesus. It happened about six days before Passover and the Crucifixion (when) and it was done in the home of some devoted followers of Jesus who lived in Bethany (where). We are not told “why” Mary did what she did. The disciples who were there when this happened obviously did not know why Mary did it either as we see in what Judas said following this anointing.

Questioned – 12:4-8

⁴ But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (he who was about to betray him), said, ⁵ “Why was this ointment not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?” ⁶ He 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. ⁷ Jesus said, “Leave her alone, so that she may keep it for the day of my burial. ⁸ For the poor you always have with you, but you do not always have me.” John 12:4–8 (ESV)

Practical, logical, human reasoning would conclude that anything we do as worship or sacrifice is a waste. The Old Testament sacrifices could be called a waste of perfectly good meat and grain. Elaborate church buildings and even the time we set aside for worship might be spent in things deemed “more practical.” Indeed, many have concluded this in the conduct of their lives. They can find something “better” to do with their money, time, and talent. Watchman Nee stated “Only that which is for no other purpose but to honor God is suitable for worship.” Although we may not understand the benefit of what is done in worship situations, the Lord sees beyond the obvious and knows the spiritual significance of the sacrifices we make and the worship we offer. This should not imply that we neglect helping the poor and needy since the very act of helping others can be another expression of worship. Both actions are appropriate.

If we witness something and do not know the motivation of those involved, then we will likely speculate and presume and invent (or make up) a motive that would seem to explain why something was done. When we are cautioned to “judge not, lest we be judged,” this tendency to “assume a motive for others actions” is part of what is being addressed. Typically, the motive we assume for others is greatly influence by what would likely be motivating us in a similar situation. We see this human tendency to judge and criticize others and to totally miss the impact of what we see happening around us in the account of Mary who poured expensive perfume on Jesus.

It seems that Judas was disillusioned by the “waste” of resources and Jesus’ acceptance of such an extravagant gift. Again, we must be careful in our judgments of what happens to those around us. Many times, we do not know the significance of what is going on in our own lives and certainly not in the lives of others. Apparently, Judas’ resentment provided an occasion for Satan to enter in and ruin his life.

Interestingly, Mary who had a reason that motivated her to pour the perfume on Jesus did not realize the eternal, spiritual significance of what she had done. Jesus saw beyond the physical and even beyond Mary’s motives to how God saw the action that was taken. No mention is made in the three accounts of what Mary’s motives were. Considering the context of the events, it seems obvious that she wanted to do something extravagant to make a statement of how much she and her family appreciated that her brother had been brought back from being dead. We could also conclude that it was simply an expression of love that she was showing in response to the fact that Jesus loved Mary, Martha and Lazarus (John 11:5).

Often, we will say that we need to look at what is happening around us or things that we experience through the eyes of God. We may get some insight into this by examining the words of Jesus in verses seven and eight.

According to the other accounts in Matthew and Mark, other disciples may have agreed with Judas and did not realize the connection of the application of the ointment with the death and burial of Jesus that was to happen six days later. Jesus' first admonition to them was simply to "stop criticizing her" since they did not recognize the eternal spiritual significance of what Mary's action meant. Then Jesus made a statement that only He understood at the time He said it. Essentially, Jesus told them that she had kept (or retained) this perfume to prepare His physical body for burial that would happen six days later. That was not Mary's intent for keeping it or for pouring it on Jesus. As mentioned earlier, it was likely simply an emotional expression of her love for Jesus and of her appreciation and joy of having her brother Lazarus back from the grave.

While there is nothing in the scriptural accounts to indicate this, the ointment could have been left over from the recent burial preparation for her brother. However, based on the estimated value of it, that may be questionable. Some commentators suggested that Mary had the ointment as an investment (or what we might think of as a saving account) to provide some financial security for herself. If that was the case, then the "sacrifice" of her offering takes on even more significance since it may have been most or all her earthly physical wealth.

Another important aspect of this event could be found in the question of "how much is enough?" How much perfume did Mary pour out on Jesus? From Mark's account we see that all of it was poured out. The words of Jesus (according to Mark) regarding the extent of her giving were that "she has done what she could" might also be thought of as "she has done all she could." This extent of giving which involved an extravagant offering worth a year's wages might be compared with the "widow's mite" that was seen several days later in the temple area. Both could be described as sacrificial and of both it could be said "she had done all she could do." Let's now take the idea of "pouring it all out and giving all we have" and ask if this was not exactly what Jesus did for us. He emptied Himself and gave His all so that all of us could be saved.

Division – 12:9-11

⁹ When the large crowd of the Jews learned that Jesus was there, they came, not only on account of him but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. ¹⁰ So the chief priests made plans to put Lazarus to death as well, ¹¹ because on account of him many of the Jews were going away and believing in Jesus. John 12:9-11 (ESV)

The friendly curiosity of the crowd was quite different from the hostility of the Jewish leaders since they saw both Jesus and Lazarus as threats.

People went to Bethany just to be able to see this man who had been raised from the dead! While they were there, they were confronted (in their own minds) with the significance of what had happened and had to make decisions that would have eternal consequences.

Because many of the people were believing that Jesus was, in fact, the Messiah solidified the determination of the "rulers" to kill Lazarus as well as Jesus. There are no recorded words in the Bible attributed to Lazarus; however, what happened to him and the reports among the people were used by God to draw people to Jesus. The fact that Lazarus was alive was a powerful witness that would confirm the claims of Jesus and give undeniable evidence that would authenticate the ministry of the Messiah.

What can we learn from the various characters who are mentioned in this event that happened in Bethany? We can start with Simon, the leper, even though he was not mentioned by John. Apparently, he simply made his home available for the celebratory feast so that others might honor what God had done. He may have even provided the food for the meal. It certainly seems possible that this was his way of expressing appreciation for being healed of leprosy. We

might say that “he did what he could.”

Martha was mentioned as carrying out her natural tendencies to be helpful and useful in serving others. Warren Wiersbe noted that such an “act of serving” is just as much a fragrant offering as what Mary did. She certainly did what she could.

Of course, Lazarus provided a witness by his just being there as proof of the power of God that was working through Jesus in His earthly ministry. He was “back” from the realm of the dead. In the same way, each one of us who has been born again of the Spirit of God is a new creation in Christ Jesus since we have been redeemed from death and now walk in newness of life. One major difference between Lazarus and many of us today is that many people knew what had happened to Lazarus and too many of us have failed to openly share what Jesus has done in our lives.

Mary gave us an excellent example of worship and we learned how God would use such true worship in ways we cannot always readily imagine.

Judas (as well as some of the other disciples) represents the dangers of viewing everything from a physical or worldly perspective. Failure to factor in the spiritual and eternal aspects of the not-so-obvious possibilities of what God can do can open us up to errors that can have consequences we did not anticipate.

The crowd of people represents the curious who are seeking for something in life that may give them more hope, more security, success, or just a better life. These are certainly to be commended for wanting improvements and having a sense of hope compared to so many who are simply satisfied with the situation they were in and have no interest in growing and improving.

There were also some in the crowd who were simply there to gather evidence that others (the Jewish leader) would use to thwart what God was doing and to maintain their control of the people. These represent what we might call “the rebellious elements of humanity” who have rejected God.

As we find ourselves in common life situations, we may encounter such representative people or even find ourselves in one of the roles of those we just mentioned. Such is life and the ways we respond to our experiences are indicators of what we believe and projectors of what (who) we are becoming.