Jesus was anointed at Bethany

John 12:1-11

Key Verse:12:3 “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.”

There have been some celebrities who renounced their career and devoted themselves to the Lord. Dolores Hart, a promising Hollywood actress with whom Elvis Presley had his first kissing scene in a movie, suddenly left her Hollywood stardom and became a nun who served the needy in a small town in Connecticut. People said that she chose Jesus, the King of kings, rather than Elvis, the king of Rock & Roll. There was a hidden episode to why she became a nun. She played Saint Clare of Assisi in the movie ‘*Francis of Assisi*’. She had a chance to meet Pope John XXIII in Vatican City because of her part in the movie. She introduced herself to the pope, saying, “I am Dolores Hart”. But the pope said, “No, you are Clare.” Later she confessed that this encounter with the pope changed her life.

In the movie “*Chariots of fire*” Eric Liddell, a Scottish Olympian, refused to run a 100 meter race in the Olympic games because it was held on a Sunday. In order to keep the Sabbath holy, he forfeited his chance to win gold at the Olympics. But in the 400 meter race he won gold and became a national hero. Not long after he became the world champion, he left his homeland and went to China as a missionary. He gave up fame and wealth as a national hero, and went to China to serve Chinese orphans. We wonder what motivated these two celebrities to give up their successful careers and to devote their lives to Christ. Who is Jesus whom they loved and devoted more to than anyone and anything else in the world? To the eyes of unbelievers they look unrealistic and foolish. But to the eyes of believers they kept something greater than worldly fame and wealth.

In today’s passage a woman pours an expensive perfume on Jesus’ feet. Jesus praises her action and accepts this as the preparation for his future. Let us study why she did this for Jesus and for what we must value most while living on this earth.

First, the house filled with the fragrance of the perfume (1-3) Look at verses 1,2. “***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***.” It was six days before the Passover. Passover is the day for the Israelites to celebrate God’s deliverance from slavery in Egypt. They killed the lamb and commemorated God’s salvation work.

This Passover was Jesus’ last Passover which he would celebrate with his disciples on this earth. Jesus would soon be arrested and killed and sacrificed as the Lamb of God for the sins of the world. Jesus was at Bethany, two miles away from Jerusalem. According to Matthew and Mark’s gospel (Mt 26:6, Mk 14:3) Jesus was in the house of Simon the Leper, who probably had invited Jesus in appreciation for his healing. There was a dinner in Jesus’ honor. As usual Martha served the dinner, while Lazarus was reclining at the table with Jesus. Where was Mary?

Look at verse 3. “***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***.” Mary always did special things for Jesus, different from others. In Luke’s gospel she sat at Jesus’ feet and listened to his word while Martha was busy cooking for and serving him. When the news was heard that Jesus was coming to see the dead Lazarus, Martha immediately went out to meet Jesus. But Mary stayed at home. Now while others were with Jesus at the dinner party, she came in the house by herself with a jar of perfume, poured it on Jesus’ feet, and wiped it with her hair.

Before we think about why she did this, we will study about what our worship should be through her action. Through Mary’s action we learn the attitude and the meaning of worship. Worship is bringing our best to God. A pint of pure nard was a very expensive perfume. According to Judas Iscariot, it was worth a year’s wages. (5) In modern currency it was worth more than fifty thousand dollars. The perfume was expensive because it was imported from India. In Jesus’ day women saved the perfume for their marriage or for secure savings. The perfume was a treasure to Mary. It could be everything for her. But she brought this perfume to Jesus and poured it on his feet.

What do we bring to God when we come to church? Do we bring our best to him and present our best to worship him? Or do we come to him reluctantly and worship him superficially? Even though we all look the same outwardly, God looks at our hearts and searches our attitude. In 2 Timothy 2:15 Paul said, “*Do your best to present yourself to God….*” Next, worship is pouring our heart on God. As Mary broke the jar of perfume, so we must break our heart and pour it on Jesus. Mary gave all her heart to Jesus when she poured out the perfume. Worshipers must not give their half heart, but give their whole heart to Jesus when worshiping. We must focus on worshiping God when we worship him. Mary’s action was the expression of her love and gratitude. Our attitude for worship should be grateful and sincere. As God is pleased with cheerful givers, so he is pleased with those who worship him with thankful hearts and joyful spirits.

Lastly, worship is filling the house of God with the fragrance of Jesus. When the perfume was poured out, the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. When we worship God, we pray that our place may be filled with the glory of God and the fragrance of Jesus Christ. Once I put a pot of lilies in the sanctuary for Easter Sunday. The fragrance of the lilies soon filled the whole house. In the same way this house should be filled with the love of Jesus and the aroma of our joy, thanks, love, grace, and sacrifice. Suppose our hearts are filled with anger, bitterness, resentment, complaining, and hatred; this place will be filled with stenches which are extracted from our corrupted hearts. Let us come to Jesus with gratitude and pour our hearts to please him so that this house may be filled with the fragrance of Jesus. Amen.

Second, for the day of my burial (4-8) How did the people respond to her action? Look at verses 4,5. “***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***.” In the other synoptic gospels Judas Iscariot said, “*Why is this waste?”* (Mt 26:8) “*Why this waste of perfume*?”(Mk 14:4) Judas thought that Mary was wasting the expensive perfume for nothing. When he did not know the motivation of her devotion, Judas said that she did a foolish thing. He said that the perfume should be sold to help the poor. Judas’ words sounded right and reasonable. But John the author said that Judas said so not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; as keeper of the money bag. Judas used to help himself to what was put into it. (6)

To the eyes of Judas, Mary’s action was a waste of money. To the eyes of unbelievers our devotion and sacrifice for God look wasteful and foolish. Going to church on Sunday and presenting offerings are not smart things to do in their eyes. But they do not know the spiritual secret behind our devotion and do not appreciate the value of our spiritual blessing. For them, gaining material benefits is important and valuable. But for the believers gaining God and being found in him is more valuable and precious than gaining material benefits. For the believers even the loss of money for the sake of God is more valuable than gaining wealth for themselves. For the believers suffering for Christ Jesus is greater value than enjoying the pleasures of sin. This is the reason why Moses refused to be known as the son of Pharaoh’s daughter. (Heb 11:24) The Hebrews says that Moses chose to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his reward. (Heb 11:25,26) Paul said in 1 Corinthians 1:18, “*For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God*.”

In Luke 12:13-21 one rich man came to Jesus to receive advice about his conflict with his brother because of their inheritance. Jesus warned him, “*Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions.*” According to Jesus, our life has more meaning and value than just making money. Life is beautiful and meaningful when we do something for God and for others. If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied. (1 Cor 15:19) But we have the living hope of eternal life in the kingdom of God as the inheritances which never perish, or spoil, or fade away, but are kept in heaven for us. (1 Pe 1:3,4) This is the reason why Jim Elliot, an American missionary in Ecuador, gave his life for Christ Jesus.

There was a young man who went to India as a missionary. He gave up a chance to become a successful career man as Northwestern graduate and went to India with the gospel of Jesus Christ. He married an Indian girl to give his whole life as a missionary. When the mother of his friend heard this, she got upset. She thought that the young man was foolish and was wasting his life for nothing. So she came to the parent of this young man and asked them to rebuke their son. To her surprise his parents praised God who had called their son to become a missionary in India. The mother of his friend was ashamed and went back home dejected. This young man chose a glorious and eternal inheritance in heaven rather than fleeting and tangible things of this world.

To Mary in today’s passage the perfume must have been everything for her. It was not easy for a woman to save such expensive perfume. She saved it since she was young for her marriage. But she poured it out all for Jesus because she knew what was the most important and valuable thing for her life on this earth; worshiping Jesus and giving her best to him. When we live in this materialistic and pragmatic society, our faith is often challenged by the worldly value system. Because of our Christian faith some of us may be treated unfairly by ungodly employers or friends. Others may be rejected, unwelcomed, discriminated, and even bullied. At that time we may feel sorrowful and isolated. But truth always wins in the end. As long as we persevere and remain as a royal priesthood, a chosen people, and people belonging to God, final victory is ours. At that time we will know who true winners are, who true rich people are, and who truly wise men are.

What makes us more amazed when we give our best to Jesus is that God uses our devotion and sacrifice for his good and glorious purpose. God never wastes our tears and sweat and he uses them to fulfill his redemptive work. How did Jesus respond to Mary’s act of devotion? Look at verses 7,8. “***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***.” Matthew and Mark added the praise of Jesus to her action in this. “*She has done a beautiful thing to me*.” (Mt 26:10, Mk 14:6) Her devotion was not only valuable, but also beautiful. She saved the perfume for herself. But after she met Jesus, she gave it to Jesus. She did not intend to save the perfume for Jesus in the beginning, but God used this perfume for Jesus’ burial. We don’t realize how God uses our devotional work and offering preciously for his kingdom and his purpose. We intend to do something for ourselves, but God uses it for his glory. Joseph in the Old Testament did not realize why his young life was one tragedy after another. But later he came to realize that all these things were planned by God who wanted to save many lives through him. (Ge 50:20) I did not know why God put me in maintenance work at Chicago UBF for the last 10 years under Dr. Samuel Lee’s leadership. I worked hard to serve God’s servant and take care of God’s house. I did not know until God used this for my self-supporting ministry in St. Louis.

Mary’s devotional act of worship was the preview of Jesus’ sacrificial death on the cross. As she poured the perfume on Jesus, so Jesus poured out his blood and water for the sins of the world. As Jesus’ dead body was anointed by women in Jerusalem, so Jesus was anointed by Mary at Bethany. Mary did not intend to prepare for the burial of Jesus, but God used it for his redemptive work. This is the reason why Jesus said, “…*she should save this perfume for the day of my burial.”* In Matthew and Mark’s gospel Jesus added to his disciples, “*Truly I tell you, wherever this gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her*.” (Mt 26:13, Mk 14:9) Jesus praised her action highly and valued it for God’s great redemptive history. In this same way our small unseen devotion and sacrifice for Jesus are appreciated by God and used for his great redemptive history. As Paul said, “…Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.” (1Co 15:58)

Look at verses 9-11. “***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 him 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***.” These verses teach us the consequence of the unrepentant hearts of the religious leaders compared to the faith of the people.

In today’s passage we learned about the beautiful act of worship through Mary’s devotion. We also learned the true value system which God wants us to have. Jim Elliot said in his diary before he was martyred in Ecuador, “*He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain that which he cannot lose.”* Amen!