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# The Climax of Love and Hate (John 12:1–11)

# 1

Jesus, therefore, six days before the Passover, came to Bethany where Lazarus was, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. So they made Him a supper there, and Martha was serving; but Lazarus was one of those reclining at the table with Him. Mary then took a pound of very costly perfume of pure nard, and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped His feet with her hair; and the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. But Judas Iscariot, one of His disciples, who was intending to betray Him, said, “Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and given to poor people?” Now he said this, not because he was concerned about the poor, but because he was a thief, and as he had the money box, he used to pilfer what was put into it. Therefore Jesus said, “Let her alone, so that she may keep it for the day of My burial. For you always have the poor with you, but you do not always have Me.” The large crowd of the Jews then learned that He was there; and they came, not for Jesus’ sake only, but that they might also see Lazarus, whom He raised from the dead. But the chief priests planned to put Lazarus to death also; because on account of him many of the Jews were going away and were believing in Jesus. (12:1–11)

The incarnation of the Lord Jesus Christ marks the zenith of history. His life not only divides the calendar (B.C. means “before Christ”; A.D. [“anno Domini”] means “in the year of the Lord”), but also human destiny. As Jesus Himself warned those who rejected Him, “Unless you believe that I am He, you will die in your sins” (John 8:24), and on another occasion, “Do you suppose that I came to grant peace on earth? I tell you, no, but rather division” (Luke 12:51; cf. Luke 2:34). Like no one else, Jesus Christ evokes the antithetical extremes of love and hate, devotion and rejection, worship and blasphemy, and faith and unbelief. How people respond to Him divides the sheep from the goats; the wheat from the tares; believers from unbelievers; the saved from the lost.

John wrote his gospel to present Jesus as the Son of God and the Messiah (20:31). In so doing, he also recorded how people reacted to Jesus’ messianic claims and miraculous signs. The apostle accordingly cites numerous examples of those who believed in Jesus (1:35–51; 2:11; 4:28–29, 41–42, 53; 6:69; 9:35–38; 10:42; 11:27, 45; 12:11; 16:27, 30; 17:8; 19:38–39; 20:28–29), and those who rejected Him (1:10–11; 2:20; 3:32; 5:16–18, 38–47; 6:36, 41–43, 64, 66; 7:1, 5, 20, 26–27, 30–52; 8:13–59; 9:16, 29, 40–41; 10:20, 25–26; 11:46–57; 12:37–40).

In this passage, which relates the story of Mary’s anointing of Jesus, the themes of belief and unbelief are particularly clear. The worshipful act of Mary epitomizes faith and love; the cold, calculated, cynical response of Judas epitomizes unbelief and hatred. The section also records other reactions to Jesus, including the devoted service of Martha, the indifference of the crowd, and the hostility of the religious leaders.

The Lord’s raising of Lazarus had stirred up murderous opposition from the hostile Jewish leaders (11:46–53). They decided that they had to kill both Jesus and Lazarus. Since His hour to die had not yet come (7:30; 8:20; 12:23; 13:1), Jesus left the vicinity of Jerusalem and stayed in the village of Ephraim (11:54), about a dozen miles to the north on the edge of the wilderness. From there He made a brief visit to Samaria and Galilee (Luke 17:11–19:28) and then, **six days before the Passover, came once more to Bethany.** His arrival would have been on the Saturday before the Passover. (Because the distance people were permitted to travel on the Sabbath was limited [cf. Acts 1:12], the Lord may have arrived after sundown on Friday. That, according to Jewish reckoning, would have been after the Sabbath had begun.) John described **Bethany** as the village **where Lazarus** lived, and Lazarus as its now most famous resident, since **Jesus had raised him from the dead.**

From the account of the supper given there in His honor, five varied reactions to Jesus emerge: Martha responded with heartfelt service,

Mary with humble sacrifice, Judas with hypocritical self-interest, the people with hollow superficiality, and the religious leaders with hostile scheming.

### THE HEARTFELT SERVICE OF MARTHA

**So they made Him a supper there, and Martha was serving; but Lazarus was one of those reclining at the table with Him. (12:2)**

The Sanhedrin had decreed that anyone who knew where Jesus was should report that information to them (11:57). But rather than turning Him in like some criminal, the Lord's friends in Bethany gave **a supper** in His honor. The purpose of the event was to express their love for Him, and especially their gratitude for His raising of Lazarus. Since *deipnon* (**supper**) refers to the main meal of the day, it would have been a lengthy one, designed with much time for leisurely conversation. The guests were surely **reclining**, leaning on one elbow with their heads toward a low, U-shaped table. How many people were there is not known, but at least Jesus, the Twelve, Mary, Martha, Lazarus, and probably Simon the leper were present.

Luke records a visit by Jesus to the home of Mary and Martha several months earlier, which provides insight into Martha's attachment to serving, even when it was not the priority:

Now as they were traveling along, He entered a village; and a woman named Martha welcomed Him into her home. She had a sister called Mary, who was seated at the Lord's feet, listening to His word. But Martha was distracted with all her preparations; and she came up to Him and said, "Lord, do You not care that my sister has left me to do all the serving alone? Then tell her to help me." But the Lord answered and said to her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and bothered about so many things; but only one thing is necessary, for Mary has chosen the good part, which shall not be taken away from her." (Luke 10:38-42)

Even after such a rebuke, here again being true to her interest, **Martha was** involved in **serving** the meal. (That John describes **Lazarus as one of the guests reclining at the table with** Jesus suggests that the feast was not in his and his sisters' home.) Matthew 26:6 and Mark 14:3 make more than a suggestion, stating specifically that the meal was held in the house of Simon the leper. Though the descriptive name stuck to him, he obviously had been healed from his disease, for people would never have gathered in the home of someone with an active case of leprosy. Not only would they have feared contagion, but also to socialize would

have ceremonially defiled them, since lepers were unclean (Lev. 13:45). Nor is it likely that Simon would have owned a house and hosted a meal in it if he had still been sick, since lepers were social outcasts (Num. 5:2). Because cures for leprosy were beyond the limited medical knowledge of that time, it is reasonable to believe that Jesus had earlier healed him.

Though others were served also, Martha's service on this occasion was primarily directed at Jesus, and was commendable for two related reasons: it was motivated by loving gratitude to Him, and by a desire to generously honor Him in the way she best knew how. There was no rebuke as in the earlier incident. Like her, all Christians are to be engaged in selfless service (Rom. 12:11; cf. Gal. 5:13; Col. 3:24; Heb. 9:14). Jesus said, "The greatest among you shall be your servant" (Matt. 23:11) and declared of Himself, "I am among you as the one who serves" (Luke 22:27), and, "the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve" (Matt. 20:28). Paul repeatedly described himself as a bond-servant of Jesus Christ (Rom. 1:1; 2 Cor. 4:5; Gal. 1:10; Phil. 1:1; Titus 1:1; cf. 1 Cor. 3:5; 4:1; 2 Cor. 3:6; 6:4; 11:23), as did James (James 1:1), Peter (2 Peter 1:1), Jude (Jude 1), and John (Rev. 1:1). In John 12:26 the Lord promised those who faithfully serve Him, "If anyone serves Me, he must follow Me; and where I am, there My servant will be also; if anyone serves Me, the Father will honor him." Although it tends to be overshadowed by Mary's dramatic act of worship, Martha's humble service on this occasion was no less commendable and pleasing to the Lord.

#### THE HUMBLE SACRIFICE OF MARY

**Mary then took a pound of very costly perfume of pure nard, and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped His feet with her hair; and the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. (12:3)**

In keeping with her portrayal elsewhere in the Gospels (cf. 11:32–33; Luke 10:39), Mary once again appears as the more pensive, reflective, and emotional of the two sisters. In a startling, spontaneous outpouring of her love for Him, she **took a pound of very costly perfume of pure nard, and anointed the feet of Jesus**. A **pound** (a Roman measure, equivalent to about twelve ounces by today's standards) was a large amount of **perfume**. **Nard** was a fragrant oil extracted from the root and spike (hence the translation "spikenard" in some English versions) of a plant native to the mountains of northern India. Perfume made from **nard** was **very costly** because of the great distance from which it had to be imported. Mary's **nard** was **pure** in quality, making it even more valuable. Some were thinking it was worth "over three

hundred denarii” (Mark 14:5), and Judas agreed with that valuation (John 12:5). As noted in the discussion of verse 5 below, such an amount would be equal to a year’s wages. The expensive alabaster vial in which it was stored also added to its value (Matt. 26:7). She broke the vial (Mark 14:3), thus giving up the whole thing—both contents and container. The perfume likely made up a sizeable portion of Mary’s net worth. But like David (2 Sam. 24:24), she refused to offer the Lord something that cost her nothing. She acted in unrestrained love.

Matthew’s (26:7) and Mark’s (14:3) parallel accounts note that Mary poured the perfume on Jesus’ head, while John says that she **anointed His feet**. All three accounts are in perfect harmony. Since the Lord was reclining at a low table, with His feet extended away from it, Mary could have easily poured the perfume first on His head, then His body (Matt. 26:12), and finally on His feet. Then, in an act that shocked the onlookers even more than the pouring out of expensive perfume, she **wiped His feet with her hair**. The Jews considered washing the feet of another person to be degrading, a necessary task to be done only by the most menial slaves (cf. John 1:27). None of the Twelve at the coming Passover meal in the upper room were willing to serve the others by washing their feet, so in a supreme act and example of lowliness, Jesus did it (cf. 13:1–15). But even more shocking than her costly and lowly washing of Jesus’ feet was the fact that Mary let down her hair. For a respectable Jewish woman to do that in public would have been considered indecent, perhaps even immoral. But Mary was not concerned with the shame she might face as a result. Instead, she was solely focused on pouring out her love and in honoring Christ, with no thought of any perceived shame that it might bring to her.

John’s note that **the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume** is the kind of vivid detail an eyewitness would recall. It also testifies to the extravagance of Mary’s act of humble devotion. She was heedless of its cost, both financially and to her reputation. The measure of her love was her total abandonment to Jesus Christ. Consequently, Mary’s noble act would, as the Lord declared, be spoken of as a memorial of her love wherever the gospel is preached (Mark 14:9).

It must be noted here that Luke records a very similar incident:

Now one of the Pharisees was requesting Him to dine with him, and He entered the Pharisee’s house and reclined at the table. And there was a woman in the city who was a sinner; and when she learned that He was reclining at the table in the Pharisee’s house, she brought an alabaster vial of perfume, and standing behind Him at His feet, weeping, she began to wet His feet with her tears, and kept wiping them with the hair of her head, and kissing His feet and anointing them with the perfume. Now when the Pharisee who had invited Him saw this, he said to himself, “If

this man were a prophet He would know who and what sort of person this woman is who is touching Him, that she is a sinner.” (Luke 7:36–39)

That this is a completely different event is clear because it took place in Galilee, not Bethany; it featured a woman who was a sinner (likely a prostitute), not Mary; and occurred much earlier in our Lord’s life, not during Passion Week. It also was an event at the house of a Pharisee, not Simon the leper.

#### THE HYPOCRITICAL SELF-INTEREST OF JUDAS

**But Judas Iscariot, one of His disciples, who was intending to betray Him, said, “Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and given to poor people?” Now he said this, not because he was concerned about the poor, but because he was a thief, and as he had the money box, he used to pilfer what was put into it. Therefore Jesus said, “Let her alone, so that she may keep it for the day of My burial. For you always have the poor with you, but you do not always have Me.”** (12:4–8)

The stunned silence that must have followed Mary’s startling and unexpected act was suddenly broken by a voice raised in protest. The conjunction *de* (**but**) introduces the stark contrast between Mary’s selflessness and Judas’s selfishness. As is always the case in the Gospels, John’s description of **Judas Iscariot** emphasizes two facts. First, he was **one of** the Lord’s **disciples** (Matt. 10:4; 26:14, 47; Mark 14:43; Luke 22:3, 47; John 6:71); second, he **was intending to betray Him** (Matt. 26:25; 27:3; Mark 3:19; 14:10; Luke 6:16; 22:4, 48; John 6:71; 13:2, 26–29; 18:2, 5; cf. Acts 1:16). So shocking and singularly defining was Judas’s betrayal that the gospel writers could not think of him or refer to him apart from it. That he was not merely a follower of Christ, but one of the Lord’s inner circle, makes his betrayal all the more heinous. It was the most despicable act in all of human history—and the one that merited the most severe punishment. In the chilling words of the Lord Jesus Christ, “Woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been good for that man if he had not been born” (Matt. 26:24).

Wanting to appear philanthropic, Judas acted outraged over such a profligate waste of money, exclaiming, **“Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and given to poor people?”** Chronologically, these are Judas’s first recorded words in the New Testament. They expose the avarice, ambition, and selfishness that ruled his heart. He had cast his lot with Jesus, expecting Him to usher in the politi-



cal, earthly messianic kingdom most Jewish people were looking for. As one of the inner circle, Judas had eagerly anticipated an exalted position in that kingdom. But now, for him, that dream had turned to ashes. Jesus had so antagonized the Jewish leaders that they intended to kill Him (John 7:1; 11:53). Not only that, the Lord Himself warned the disciples that His death was inevitable (e.g., Mark 8:31; 9:31; 10:33). And when the Galilean crowds sought to crown Jesus as the earthly king Judas thought He would be, the Lord refused to cooperate with them (John 6:14-15).

Disillusioned, Judas—facing the end of his ambitions—decided to at least get some financial compensation for the three years he had wasted on Jesus. John, not seeing it at that moment, but writing in retrospect many years later, makes the appropriate inspired comment on Judas's real motive: he **said this, not because he was concerned about the poor, but because he was a thief, and as he had the money box, he used to pilfer what was put into it.** As noted above, Mary's perfume was worth a lot of money; since a denarius was a day's wages for a common laborer (Matt. 20:2), **three hundred denarii** equaled a year's wages (allowing for Sabbaths and other holy days on which no work was done). Seeing that much money elude his grasp infuriated Judas, and he lashed out at Mary. "Judas' disapproval of Mary's action related not to loss of opportunity to do more for the poor but to his own loss of opportunity to steal from the common purse" (Colin Kruse, *The Gospel According to John*, The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003], 263). So persuasive was his seemingly righteous indignation that others joined in his protest (Matt. 26:8-9; Mark 14:4-5).

Though some have tried to attribute noble motives to Judas (i.e., by arguing that he was a misguided patriot, trying to prod Christ into ushering in His kingdom), the New Testament portrays him as nothing but a greedy thief and a murderous traitor—even a Devil (John 6:70-71; cf. 13:2, 27). Judas is the greatest example of missed opportunity in history. He lived day in and day out with Jesus Christ, God incarnate, for three years. Yet in the end Judas rejected Him, betrayed Him, was overcome by guilt (but not genuine repentance), committed suicide, and went "to his own place" (Acts 1:25)—that is, hell (John 17:12) in its most potent form.

The Lord immediately defended Mary, sternly rebuking Judas (the verb translated **let alone** is in the second person singular, meaning "you") by commanding him, "**Let her alone, so that she may keep it for the day of My burial.**" Jesus obviously did not mean that Mary would keep the perfume (or at least part of it) until His burial, since she had just poured it all out (cf. Mark 14:3). While commentators disagree on how to understand these words, the most satisfactory solution is to understand an ellipsis in the Lord's statement. Supplying the missing words, the sense would be, "Let her alone; she did not sell the perfume

[as you wish she had], so that she could keep it for the day of my burial” (cf. D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 429–30; cf. Andreas J. Köstenberger, *John*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004], 363–64).

Mary’s act was a spontaneous outpouring of her love and devotion to Christ. Yet, like Caiaphas’s unwitting prophecy (11:49–52), it had a deeper significance. In Matthew 26:12 Jesus said, “When she poured this perfume on My body, she did it to prepare Me for burial” (cf. Mark 14:8). The **burial** of which Jesus prophetically spoke was not the actual placing of His dead body in the tomb, but the anointing she had just done, which He saw as a symbol of His soon coming death and burial. Part of the lavish expenditures associated with many first-century funerals was the cost of perfumes to mask the odor of decay (cf. John 11:39). This act by Mary, as in the case of Caiaphas (11:49–52) revealed a far greater reality than she realized at the time. Her anointing prefigured the one Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus would later perform on His body after Jesus’ death (John 19:38–40).

If Judas had really wanted to help the poor, he would not have lacked opportunity since, as Jesus reminded them all (the verb and pronoun in this phrase are plurals), **“You always have the poor with you”** (cf. Mark 14:7). The Lord was not disparaging the giving of charity to the poor (cf. Deut. 15:11), but rather was challenging the disciples to keep their priorities straight. The opportunity to do good to Him, as Mary had done, would not last long, because they would **not always have** Him physically present with them. Here again the Lord’s words were a prediction of His coming death, now less than a week away.

Judas now stood at the crossroads. Unmasked as a hypocrite, pretending to care for the poor while in reality embezzling from the common purse, he faced the ultimate decision. He could fall at Jesus’ feet in humble, penitent repentance, confess his sin, and seek forgiveness. Or he could pridefully harden his heart, refuse to repent, surrender to Satan’s influence, and betray the Lord. Tragically and sinfully, he chose the latter course, with full and sole culpability for its consequences, though it fulfilled the purpose of God for the sacrifice of His Son (cf. 13:18–19). Immediately after this incident, “Judas Iscariot, who was one of the twelve, went off to the chief priests in order to betray Him to them. They were glad when they heard this, and promised to give him money. And he began seeking how to betray Him at an opportune time” (Mark 14:10–11).

## THE HOLLOW SUPERFICIALITY OF THE PEOPLE

**The large crowd of the Jews then learned that He was there; and they came, not for Jesus' sake only, but that they might also see Lazarus, whom He raised from the dead. (12:9)**

After the Sabbath, a **large crowd of the Jews** who were in Jerusalem for Passover **learned that Jesus was** in Bethany. (The term **Jews** here does not refer to the religious leaders, but to the common people [cf. 11:55–56].) They **came** to Bethany **not for Jesus' sake only, but that they might also see Lazarus, whom He raised from the dead.** News of that sensational miracle had spread, and the curious crowd wanted to see both the miracle worker, and the one whom He had raised.

These people were not yet openly hostile to Jesus, like Judas and the religious leaders, but neither were they committed to Him, like Martha and Mary. They were the thrill seekers, following the latest sensation, superficially interested in Jesus, but spiritually indifferent and ultimately antagonistic to Him. Like the members of the Laodicean church, they were “lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold” (Rev. 3:16). At the triumphal entry they would hail Him, shouting “Hosanna! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel” (John 12:13). But only a few days later they would scream, “Away with Him, away with Him, crucify Him!” (John 19:15), and some would come to mock Him as He was hanging on the cross (Matt. 27:39–40).

## THE HOSTILE SCHEMING OF THE LEADERS

**But the chief priests planned to put Lazarus to death also; because on account of him many of the Jews were going away and were believing in Jesus. (12:10–11)**

By no means did the crowds that flocked to Bethany to see Jesus and Lazarus escape the notice of the Jewish authorities. The ruthless **chief priests** had already plotted to kill Jesus (11:53); now they expanded the plot and **planned to put Lazarus to death also.** As living proof of Jesus' miraculous power, the resurrected Lazarus presented a great threat to the Sadducees, because **on account of him many of the Jews were going away and were believing in Jesus** (cf. 11:48). He was an undeniable testimony to the Lord's messianic claims. Not only that, a resurrected man was also an embarrassment to the Sadducees in another way: they denied the resurrection of the dead (Matt. 22:23), and he was

an undeniable refutation of that error. Unable to counter the incontrovertible testimony Lazarus provided by being alive, they sought to destroy the evidence by killing him. Their tangled web of deception was expanding, as Leon Morris notes: "It is interesting to reflect that Caiaphas had said, 'it is expedient for you that one man die for the people' (11:50). But one was not enough. Now it had to be two. Thus does evil grow" (*The Gospel According to John*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979], 582).

No one is neutral regarding Jesus Christ; as He Himself warned, "He who is not with Me is against Me; and he who does not gather with Me, scatters" (Luke 11:23). Whether loving and serving Him, like Mary and Martha, being indifferent and vacillating toward Him, like the crowd, or hating and opposing Him, like Judas and the chief priests, everyone takes a stand somewhere. What that stand is determines each person's eternal destiny, since "there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12).