

THE GOSPEL OF BELIEF - Studies in John's Gospel

Part forty-six - Sunday, May 25th, 2014, 10:00 a.m.

Teaching #1731 - Pastor Don Horban, Cedarview Community Church

WORSHIP AND BETRAYAL IN THE SAME ROOM - AND THE ROOTS OF EACH

John 12:1-11 - "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. [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." [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."

As you'll see at the end of this teaching, John continues to magnify the tension between *belief* and *unbelief*. This chapter contains Jesus' last words and actions in audience of the general public. Chapter 13 begins a section containing Jesus' final words and discourses to His disciples in the upper room. From there John launches into the events of Jesus' trial and execution. We are now closing in on the last days of Jesus.

Chapter twelve focuses in on three public events: Jesus' anointing at Bethany, His triumphal entry into Jerusalem, and the visit of the Greeks to Jesus. The theme running through these three events as John describes them is the coming end of Jesus' earthly life. They are all portals through which we get a sense of the inevitable goal to which Jesus' whole life was destined.

The first of these three accounts is the anointing of Jesus, which, in ways Mary seems to sense, was for His coming burial. There are similar accounts of anointing of Jesus in all four gospels. Debate lingers over whether they might be the same event with slight variations in recorded detail. My own opinion, though it really isn't crucial to our study, is that Matthew, Mark, and John all describe the *same* event, while Luke's is a different account altogether. But don't worry about that.

There is no missing John's intent to place two key characters at the very center of his account. Mary and Judas are the two key players. Sacrifice and selfishness are in the same room with Jesus. And John loads up his account with lessons from each.

1) **MARY'S SACRIFICIAL DEVOTION IS JOYFUL AND PAINLESS BECAUSE HER HEART IS FILLED WITH THANKFULNESS TO JESUS**

John 12:1-3 - "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."

It is striking that we only learn the material worth of Mary's ointment from the lips of Judas. *He's* the one who has it calculated down to the last denarii. John merely rounds it off as a "*pound of expensive ointment*"(3). Mary makes no such calculations. There's a liberating recklessness in her action. She doesn't pour out *some* of the ointment. She doesn't measure out *half* in a separate container. She *dumps out* the whole container - shaking out the last drop.

There is nothing in the account to even hint Jesus *requested* this from Mary. It was *her* idea, not *His*. So why did she do it? What was it that so heated her heart? John, the good writer he is, doesn't blurt out Mary's motive explicitly. Instead, he reveals it more subtly, like the fragrance of that perfume filling up the room:

John 12:1-2 - "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."

Notice how John places *Lazarus* front and center in these verses. Mary was dining again with her brother. He used to be in the *grave*. Now he's sitting at the *table*. Mary can't hold in her amazement and thankfulness. Picture them around the table. There is family conversation again. Lazarus is eating and laughing. But Mary isn't just looking at *Lazarus*. She's looking over at *Jesus*. Who in the world could blame her for being overwhelmed at the miracle grace of our Lord? She can't hold her joy in anymore.

Sacrifice only hurts when our hearts are small and closed. Mary is looking at Jesus in all of His glory. Her soul is bubbling over with what He has done for her. And the life lesson is if we are bent more toward what it *costs* to follow Jesus than on what we have *received* from Jesus even when we *give* to our Lord's cause it will feel more like *paying a bill* than pouring out our hearts in joyful love. Nothing is heavier to carry around than selfishness in a Christian mask.

That's where John brings Judas into his account:

2) **MARY'S ACTION DOESN'T MAKE SENSE TO JUDAS AND CAN'T MAKE SENSE TO JUDAS**

John 12:4-6 - “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.”

John means for us to take note of Judas’ instant awareness of the precise value of Mary’s ointment. Judas sees what many may not have grasped - “*That’s a year’s worth of income!*” He doesn’t get this information from Mary and he doesn’t get it from Jesus. These kinds of ointments were very common forms of investment. They were imported. They held their value and appreciated. They were compact and easily stored, moved, and sold. People put their money in these perfumes. And Judas knew all about investments.

Judas had a sharp economic mind. Today he’d be the one knowing the value of each stock and fund worth owning. He’d know where interest rates were going. He’d know property values and hot commodities. He’d know why the economy was the way it was. He’d know where it was heading. And he’d know how to make money, even in hard times. Judas could turn a nickle into a quarter.

Please don’t misunderstand me. There’s nothing wrong with any of that. There’s no virtue in financial ignorance. But there’s still a problem. Judas can calculate the precise value of Mary’s perfume. What he can’t see is the glory of Jesus Christ. Or perhaps we should say it like this. The value of Mary’s perfume was more vivid to him than the glory of Jesus Christ. He could *feel* the one more than the other. He was *oriented* toward one more than the other. He was *motivated* by the one more than the other.

But John’s account doesn’t stop there. John probes deeper. How did Judas *get* like this? What is it that gradually draws him into disappointment and eventually, betrayal?

3) **UNBELIEF IS ROOTED IN SELF-INTEREST RATHER THAN A LACK OF INTELLECTUAL EVIDENCE**

John 12:6 - “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.”

John alerts his readers that Judas had been forming his bent life for some time. Moral collapse is never instant. Judas had literally been nickle-and-diming himself into a shabby life for a while. But it’s unlikely he started out this way.

Somehow he managed to justify what he was doing over the course of months of compromise. Probably there were some red lights flashing. But he pushed past them. Compromise is only hard at the beginning. After a while the standards slide and it all feels normal.

But where did Judas begin to go wrong? The synoptics leave some room for speculation. We know even the disciples had a hard time coming to terms with Jesus’ failure to capitalize on earthly success and power. Jesus constantly avoided aligning Himself with political power and prestige. He never made pronouncements on matters of state. He insisted those whom He healed tell no one. He refused to pander to His fans. He refused to be the people’s earthly king.

So it became increasingly apparent that just as *Jesus* was resisting any form of earthly kingdom, His *followers* would miss out on it as well. And just as Jesus was becoming an object of anger and discontent His disciples would have to face the likely possibility of losing everything just for being associated with Him.

Remember, Judas had *seen* Jesus heal the blind man. He had *seen* Jesus make the lame man pick up his bed and walk. He had *seen* Jesus feed the 5000 with a few loaves and fish. There was evidence a-plenty. That wasn’t Judas’ problem.

In short, Judas had to face the possibility of *gaining nothing* and *losing everything* if he continued loyally with Jesus. And the reality of another option began to grow in Judas’s mind. If he were to take the opposite route of *forsaking*, and even *betraying* Jesus, not only would he not *lose* everything, but he could even *profit* from his actions and gain the favor of the religious power establishment to boot.

In other words, what happens in Judas is probably only unique in *degree*, not in *kind*. The battle in his heart is more common than one might think. When Jesus was an *advantage* Judas rode along with the others. When Jesus was a *liability* he wasn’t that interested. And I would suggest to you that there are many of us in this room who might see that same conflict in our heart. Spiritual mindedness can come and go, depending on the crowd at hand or the issue demanding attention. Sometimes Jesus seems to fit and sometimes He doesn’t. It’s just not always popular to devote your highly visible life to Jesus.

And whenever that battle rages *unchecked by immediate repentance and yielding to the Holy Spirit* the end will always be the same. People who refuse to yield to Jesus are eventually forced by life itself to choose the opposite direction. They usually don’t even see the end coming.

Jesus pressed this truth home various times in His teaching - **Luke 11:23-26** - “Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters. [24] “When the unclean spirit has gone out of a person, it passes through waterless places seeking rest, and finding none it says, ‘I will return to my house from which I came.’ [25] And when it comes, it finds the house swept and put in order. [26] Then it goes and brings seven other spirits more evil than itself, and they enter and dwell there. And the last state of that

person is worse than the first.”

Spiritual neutrality is an impossibility. Jesus’ first sentence rings the bell on the issue of dodging loyalty when the cost of following gets high - **“Whoever is not *with* me is *against* me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters”**(23). **“With,”** and **“against,”** are two powerfully **opposite** words. They are poles apart - as far as the East is from the West. The self-centeredness of the **Judas mind-set** is never static. We’re meant, I believe, to notice the way Jesus specifically says those who don’t stay **“with”** Him turn **“against”** Him. There are no neutral words in Jesus’ sentence.

Don’t misunderstand me. Jesus knows we are weak and imperfect. He is not a ruthless Lord. He constantly takes wanderers the likes of me back into His grace and care. But that doesn’t remove His caution for **carefulness** and **constant repentance** for a cold heart.

Look again at Judas. Look again at what he says when Mary pours out her ointment - **John 12:5** - **“Why was this ointment not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?”** Don’t miss the point. Judas can’t **admit** his true condition. He probably tells **himself** he is more concerned about the poor than his own greed. Unbelief is taking him prisoner. That’s why I say again it’s a **loving** Lord who warns His followers of this condition. Lukewarm hearts turn into cold. Mildly careless hearts don’t remain soft forever. And they can’t remain neutral.

Jesus will help the loyal. Look especially at those **demanding times** in your life - those times when friends and family and opportunities all seem to make following Jesus **embarrassing** and **pointless**. And right there and then **make an emphatic, brave declaration for Christ**. You’ll find those are the times where your soul can gain the most growth and faith.

4) **DIDN’T JESUS CARE ABOUT THE POOR?**

John 12:7-8 - **“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.’”**

I don’t suppose anyone is particularly surprised or bothered that Judas didn’t care much about the poor and merely used them as a cover-up for his own greed. That’s incredibly wicked, but we don’t expect much better from Judas at this stage of history.

More troubling is the comment from Jesus - **“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.”**

What does this mean? Is Jesus just bumping the needs of the poor farther down the list? Is He justifying ignoring them? We need to consider what’s going on here.

Some of the best scholars point out the need for keeping **verses 7 and 8** together. Jesus is telling the disciples to leave Mary alone because she - at least with **some** measure of understanding - is preparing Jesus for burial (7). And I think this is Jesus’ way of reminding his first disciples that any concern for the poor that doesn’t prioritize Christ’s redemptive death isn’t really loving the poor fully at all. To feed the bodies of the poor and neglect God’s plan for giving them eternal life is to jumble up priorities. We will love our neighbor best (**commandment #2**) when we love God and His redemptive revelation **first** (**commandment #1**).

5) **LOYAL DISCIPLES UNDERSTAND THAT FOLLOWING CHRIST MEANS BEING TREATED LIKE CHRIST**

John 12:9-11 - **“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.”**

This whole series is entitled **“The Gospel of Belief.”** It’s actually about **belief** and **unbelief** and the reality of the conflict between the two. I don’t know if you’ve been counting, but this is yet another text that ends on the same theme - **John 12:10-11** - **“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.”**

Unbelief can’t abide this turning toward belief. Lazarus has done **nothing**. He’s not handing out tracts. He’s not preaching sermons as far as we can tell. But his very **existence** gives glory to the power of Jesus as the resurrection and the life, and the unbelievers can’t stand it. Note it well. They want to **kill** Lazarus because Lazarus makes Jesus look great.

And so we learn rejection of Jesus isn’t an **intellectual** matter. Unbelief is a **control** matter. It’s a **pride** matter. It’s a **repentance** matter.

And the take-home-from-church lesson is simply this. If you are a **believer** - a **disciple** of Jesus Christ - **plan** for opposition in your life. Understand there won’t be anything **reasonable** about the push-back you receive simply because you embrace Jesus Christ as the Savior of the world and God the Son. That’s enough. That’s all you have to do to experience the kind of rejection Jesus Himself experienced.

I say this because the common assumption - though it would never have been the common assumption throughout the long history of the church - the **modern** assumption is it’s just the **church** unbelievers don’t like. On this theory Constantine and organized religion have mucked everything up for the cause of Christ. If only we could strip away all of the legalistic, formal religious baggage people would be

enamored with the simple Jesus of the gospels.

But there is absolutely no evidence that this is so. In fact, Jesus Himself said exactly the opposite - **John 15:18-20a** - ***"If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. [19] If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. [20] Remember the word that I said to you: 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you...."***

But this isn't the whole story. There is also an upside to this. Jesus pressed this home in very direct and powerful words - **Matthew 5:11-12** - ***"Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. [12] Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you."***

Most of us consider it **worse** when people speak evil of us **falsely**. When what people say isn't true it seems more unfair. But Jesus says the opposite. When people have to reach into falsehood to express their anger and rejection you know they aren't hating you because of **you**. They're only using you to attack Jesus Christ.

Rejoice when people treat you **just as they treated Jesus**, and you have given them **no other reason** for rejecting you. Each minute this happens your reward is piling up in heaven. Never lose sight of it.

Always remember - especially if you are young - follow Jesus **loyally** in all circumstances. Follow Him with the confidence that He will make the rest of your life work. He is mighty enough to over-ride those moments that seem to cost more than they immediately give. And in the long run you will find the most joy in the journey as you honor Him above all else.