

LOVE AND FORGIVENESS

John 12:1-11

Key Verses: 12:7-8

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In chapter 12, John records four events: First, the anointing of Jesus by Mary at Bethany (1-11). Second, Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem (12-19). Third, Jesus’ teaching about the kernel of wheat (20-36). Fourth, the Jews’ rejection of Jesus (37-50).

Today we want to study the first event, the anointing of Jesus. Mary expresses her love for Jesus in a very unique way. Let’s think about love and forgiveness.

I. MARY’S ACT OF LOVE AND WORSHIP (1-3)

Look at verse 1. *“Six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, where Lazarus lived, whom Jesus had raised from the dead.”* The Passover was a feast to commemorate God’s deliverance of the Israelites from their slavery in Egypt. To punish Pharaoh’s stubborn refusal to let go of God’s people, the angel of death swept through Egypt to kill all the firstborn of the land. But the angel passed over the houses of the Israelites whose doorposts were smeared with the blood of the lamb. Since then, the Israelites have celebrated the Passover. We remember how Jesus went up to Jerusalem to celebrate the feast when he was only twelve years old. Jesus must have gone up to Jerusalem every year to celebrate the Passover. Now, this was the last Passover for Jesus, because this time he was to become the Passover lamb. He was going to die on the cross as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. On the way, Jesus arrived at Bethany, where he had raised Lazarus from his grave. There, a special dinner was prepared in his honor at the home of Simon the Leper (Mt 26:6). Jesus had given a second chance of life to the dead man Lazarus. He wiped the tears from the eyes of his sisters, Martha and Mary. We can imagine how happy the sisters were. So were the people in the village. But they could not celebrate the joyful occasion right away, because Jesus had to leave quickly to avoid the hostility of the Jews (11:54). Now they had an opportunity to honor him with a village-wide feast. *Martha served, while Lazarus was among those reclining at the table with him.* Men who had buried Lazarus were now eating with him at the same table, honoring Jesus who had raised him.

As soon as they began to eat, a dramatic event took place. *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* (3). Pure nard was a very expensive perfume imported from India. A pint of it was worth about a year’s wages—about 300 denarii (5). Mary must have saved money for many years to acquire the perfume, most likely for her wedding. It was the most valuable thing she owned. She brought the treasured possession to Jesus and dedicated it to him by

pouring the entire amount on him. Her sister Martha cooked delicious food. It was her way of expressing her love and gratitude for Jesus. Mary looked around what she could do to show her love and gratitude for Jesus. She didn't have much. But she had a jar of expensive perfume. She decided to anoint Jesus with it to show her love and gratitude.

The dinner party was to honor Jesus. That was the primary reason why Mary wanted to anoint Jesus. But there's more to the story. The anointing of Jesus is recorded in all four gospels, with some variations. Certainly, there are differences in the gospel accounts, but their accounts have a common theme, that is, Jesus was anointed by a woman who wanted to express her love for him; someone criticized her for wasting a large amount of money, but Jesus accepted it as an act of love. Some of the differences in their accounts are due to their different viewpoints of the event and can be reconciled easily. For example, John and Luke say that she poured the perfume on Jesus' feet and wiped his feet with her hair (3, Lk 7:38). Matthew and Mark said she poured the perfume on his head (Mt 26:7, Mk 14:3). It's possible that she began to pour the perfume on his head first, and then on his feet, wiping them with her hair. After all, she had a full jar of the perfume, enough to anoint his entire body. Anyway, Luke adds one more detail to the story, saying that she had been a sinful woman. Accepting her act as an act of love, Jesus said, "Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven—as her great love has shown..." (Lk 7:47)

Was the sinful woman in Luke's account Mary of Bethany? We cannot be sure. But one thing we can be sure is that Mary was a sinful woman, as everyone is a sinner, for all have sinned (Ro 3:23). So it seems plausible to say that Mary was grateful to Jesus for the grace of forgiveness as well.

Before meeting Jesus personally, Mary used to live a sinful life, following her sinful desires. Like many women today, cosmetic items such as perfume were precious to her. She wanted to look attractive, especially to men. But since Jesus came into her heart, Jesus became more precious to her than anything or anyone in this world, because Jesus forgave her sins. He gave her a true meaning of life and a true purpose in life. She did not have to put on heavy make-up to please men. She became even prettier without any make-up as her heart was filled with joy and satisfaction. She was happy and joyful, knowing that all her sins were forgiven by the grace of Jesus.

How about us? How can we have a true joy in life? How can we have a true purpose in life? How can we live a life to the full? Only Jesus can help us. The woman we met in John 4 was thirsty for men's love. She was not happy. After accepting Jesus as the Messiah and the Savior, however, her life was turned around 180. She could not stop saying, "I met a man who knew everything about my sinful past, but did not condemn me. He is the Christ!" Mary of Bethany had the same joy and happiness. No one else or nothing else in this world can give us this kind of joy and happiness. Only Jesus can give us this.

This is the kind of joy and happiness that King David experienced. God anointed David as king of Israel. David was a man of faith. He was a man after God's own heart. He was a good shepherd for his people. But he was not without sin. One day David slept

in until late in the afternoon, while his soldiers were out fighting to defend the nation from their enemies. From the roof of his palace, David saw a beautiful woman bathing. Her name was Bathsheba. David brought her in and slept with her. After committing the adultery, he tried to cover up his sins. He had Uriah, her husband, murdered. But when the Prophet Nathan rebuked him for what he had done, his conscience was pierced. His remorse was so real that he felt he was unclean like a leper. He felt that his heart was as dirty as inside of a chimney. His kingship, power and honor were totally useless to alleviate his guilty feelings. What did he do? David confessed his sins before God. He asked for God's mercy and forgiveness. Psalm 51 is a song of his sincere repentance. He cried to God, *"Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin"* (1-2). David also asked God to give him a pure heart, *"Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me ... Restore to me the joy of salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me"* (10,12). God accepted his repentant heart and forgave his sins. God set him free from the torment of his guilty conscience.

So, what did David learn from this experience? He learned the profound truth that a person can be truly happy only when he knows that God has forgiven his sins. David's conviction about true happiness is quoted in Romans 4:7-8: *"Blessed are they whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will never count against him."* David had everything. As a king, he could have anything he wanted to make him happy. But nothing from this world could make him happy when he was tormented by his guilty conscience. Only God's forgiveness set him free. That's why he said that the happiest man is one who knows that his sins are forgiven by God.

If we understand the grace of God's forgiveness of our sins, we can appreciate Mary's action--why she expressed her love for Jesus in such dramatic way. Since Jesus came into her heart, her life was changed. Jesus was all the world to her. She wanted to show her love for Jesus somehow. When she poured the perfume on him, she was pouring out her heart to Jesus. She expressed her love for Jesus in this way because she knew the grace of Jesus.

What Mary did was also an act of worship. Washing the feet of a guest was the job of a servant. The feet in sandals in those days were dirty as the roads were littered with animal droppings. But Mary fell at Jesus' feet and anointed his feet. She poured the perfume on his feet and wanted to wipe them. But there was no towel. And the men watching her were not exactly helpful, because they didn't like the scene she was making. But Mary did not care. She pulled down her hair and began to wipe his feet with her hair. To a woman, hair is very important. The Bible says that woman's hair is her glory (1Co 11:15). Some women spend hours and spend much money to have a hairdo they want. But Mary used her hair to wipe Jesus' feet. This was her way of expressing love and honor for Jesus.

Jesus has also forgiven us our sins. What are we willing to do for Jesus to express our love and gratitude for him? One hymn song includes these words: "I gave my life for

thee, My precious blood I shed, That thou might'st ransomed be, And quickened from the dead; I gave, I gave my life for thee, What hast thou given for me? I gave, I gave my life for thee, What hast thou given for me?"

II. JESUS SEES OUR MOTIVES (4-11)

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."* From a practical standpoint, what Judas said was very reasonable. Why waste so much of the expensive perfume? A couple of drops would have been sufficient. Pouring the whole jar was overkill. But the author John's comment tells us what was really on Judas' mind. Verse 6 says, *"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."* Judas Iscariot, who had the mind of a thief, could not see the beauty of a woman's pure heart. He could not see the beautiful act of love and worship. He only saw the dollar figures of the perfume. He quickly calculated that the perfume was worth around \$30,000 (in today's dollars). Judas was smart, but his heart was tainted with greed. And the tragic consequence of this was that he could not meet the Messiah personally as Mary did. He had no appreciation of the grace of forgiveness. He had no love or gratitude for Jesus. This was the real tragedy for Judas.

Judas Iscariot followed Jesus with an impure motive. He accepted Jesus' calling, but he never gave up his desires for money. His motive in following Jesus was not to learn of Jesus and obey him. He had his own agenda. As the treasurer of Jesus' group, he helped himself from the moneybag. He was more interested in money than in Jesus' words. In the famous painting, "the Last Supper" by Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519), Judas Iscariot is shown to hold tight the moneybag. Finally, he betrayed Jesus at a crucial moment.

There was a pastor who would give an altar call at the end of every worship service. He invited people to come forward if they wanted to make a commitment to Christ. One day he was happy to see his 3-year-old daughter come forward. The girl patiently waited in line to talk to the pastor. When her father leaned down to hear her prayer request, she whispered, "Can we go out to eat after church?" Her motives were not so pure. But then, she was only a three year old child. Sadly, many adults have impure motives in following Jesus, as Judas did.

The motive of a Christian ministry should be helping people to believe in Jesus and receive eternal life. Our motive must be pure. When I first became a Christian back in Korea, I admired the UBF missionaries who gave up their good jobs and comfortable homes to go to other countries to serve young people. We often sang a song about going out as missionary, which included the lyrics, "without name and without glory." To me their lives were so beautiful. I think this was one of the reasons why I was able to accept God's call to be a missionary when I was such an unlikely candidate. And I am sure that our missionaries here had a similar experience and motivation.

What happened to Judas Iscariot who had an impure motive in following Jesus? He could not remain as one of his disciples to the end. He sold Jesus to the Jewish leaders for 30 silver coins. Afterward, however, his conscience was stricken. So he tried to return the money, but the Jewish leaders didn't take it back, calling it the "blood money" (Mt 27:6). So he threw the coins on the floor of the temple and hanged himself on a tree. But the rope was loose and he fell down to the ground and his intestines spilled out. God blesses those who have a pure motive in following him. God curses those who have an impure motive before the holy God.

How did Jesus see Mary's action? Look at verse 7. *"Leave her alone," Jesus replied. "It was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial."* I don't think Mary was aware that her perfume was intended for Jesus' burial. Nevertheless, Jesus accepted her act of love and credited it as part of God's work. Jesus says in Mark 14:9: *"Truly I tell you, wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her."* Jesus did not consider her act a waste!

Sometimes we wonder if what we are doing is a waste of time and effort. Especially after spending so much time trying to help one student and praying for him wholeheartedly and not seeing any immediate result, we become frustrated. But we learn here that God accepts our heart's desire as long as our motive is pure. Jesus values not only the outcome but also the process, that is, our efforts and heart's desire to serve his sheep. Therefore, we shouldn't lose our hearts after doing good work for Jesus as long as our motive is pure.

Jesus says in verse 8. *"You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me."* Jesus never ignored the poor. In fact he was a good shepherd especially for the poor including widows and orphans. But the coming of the Son of God to this world was a once and for all event in human history. Taking care of the poor must be a part of Christian ministry, as we will always have the poor among us. But the main focus of our ministry must be sharing the message of Jesus' cross and resurrection so that people may come to Jesus and receive eternal life.

Verses 9-11 tell us that the chief priests made plans to kill Lazarus this time. Why? It was because Lazarus' presence was a powerful witness to Jesus' life-saving work of God. Many Jews were going over to Jesus and putting their faith in him because of Lazarus. So they tried to eliminate the evidence of God's work. The Jewish leaders had a terrible motive. They looked holy outwardly in their flowing purple robes. But there was no love for God in their hearts.

Like Mary did, let us bring our love and thankful hearts to Jesus who has given us the grace of forgiveness. May God help us to have true joy and happiness by remembering his grace of forgiveness! May God also help us to keep our motives pure before him!