

## Extravagant Love

John 12:1-11

What is Jesus worth to you? You could look in a *Kelly Blue Book* and find out real quick what your car is worth? You could talk to Jason and he could recommend a good appraiser who could tell you exactly what your house is worth? You could sit down with Amber and let her do her insurance thing, and with several questions she could give you an idea of what your possessions are worth. It's kind of morbid, but if you want to buy life insurance you can even get an idea what your life is worth in least in dollars. But what is Jesus worth to you? How do you value your relationship with your Lord and Savior? This is a poignant question as we conclude our series on kingdomnomics, and move into this Christmas season where we celebrate the birth of our Savior.

If you were to have asked Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus what Jesus was worth, I think I know what her answer would have been. She would say something like, "everything," or "all of it." In John 12, we come across an account that is either most flagrant waste of money, or the most extravagant act of love. How you see it will depend entirely on what is valuable to you.

This is the last sermon in our series on kingdomnomics— four stories from the four gospels that each challenge the economy of the world. Jesus confounds the economists. He scandalizes Wall Street. He scorns the experts on Madison Avenue. He ignores the Ivy League Academics. He completely rearranges our priorities and redefines our understanding of what is value and worth.

I know that we are getting in the frame of mind where we are thinking about Jesus' birth, but in this account, we are less than a week before the crucifixion and Jesus' death on the cross. Even in the shadow of the cross, though, Jesus, has already shown that He is the Lord even over death, for in the previous chapter He raised Lazarus back from death. It was an emphatic declaration of his authority over the grave. The Jews believed the spirit left the body after three days, but Jesus raised him on the 4<sup>th</sup> day. In the shadows, however, the religious leaders are already plotting how they might arrest Jesus and take him into custody.

Tomorrow, Jesus will enter Jerusalem for the very last time before his arrest. It is a triumphal entry. Fulfilling the prophecy of Zechariah, the crowd hails him as the king of Israel. Their allegiance is short-lived. Popular opinion can be a fickle thing. Just as one crowd hails his entry into Jerusalem, another crowd on Friday will shout and demand his crucifixion.

None of this is a mystery to Jesus. It is not unexpected. He was not caught off guard. He has predicted his death before, and has even prophesied what sort of death he will die. He will do so again before the end of this chapter.

But before Jesus enters the arena where the fate and sin of the entire world hang in the balance, he enjoys one last respite. Just a few short miles and a few short hours from his appointment with destiny, he enjoys the hospitality of beloved dear friends. Throughout his ministry, Bethany and the home of Mary and Martha and their brother, Lazarus has been like a home. Even though the Son of Man had no place to lay his head, here there was always a warm meal and a bedroll.

Today, this love will be poured out in the most extraordinary of ways— some would even say shocking or scandalous. It was not unusual to wash the feet of a guest who enters your home, especially an honored guest. That was merely common courtesy. What was unusual was to do so with a pound of expensive perfume.

This is not a small drop, just a fingertip applied to the top of the bottle and dabbed on the skin. We know from Matthew and Mark that Mary anoints Jesus generously. She begins by anointing his head and moving down to his feet. It's the whole bottle. It runs everywhere— down his body into his clothes. Mark says she "breaks the bottle." This is a one-time extravagant act. She is not saving any until later. She's all-in on this. The quantity is so great that the whole *"house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume."*

Imagine the shock on everyone's faces around the room. See their mouths falling open. Hear the breath being taken in and then held. Hear the whispers and murmurs. Some said it was a waste. Finally, Judas blurts out what everyone is thinking, "Why wasn't this perfume sold and the money given to the poor?" Like Judas, everyone in the room probably could have thought of at least a dozen different things that money could better be used for. Once again the economics of the kingdom flies in the face of the economics of the world. Mary's act makes no economic sense. Anyone who loves the bottom-line is horrified by her display. Again we are astounded by the mathematics of grace.

The only one who wasn't upset by it, other than perhaps Martha and Lazarus, was Jesus himself, who defended Mary's act of extravagance. Mary, as much as anyone understood the grace of Jesus, for it was her brother Jesus had just resurrected. Even now, Jesus said she was preparing his body for the greatest act of grace to ever be shown in all of history. Jesus said it was a worthy investment for a life about to be laid down for all of humanity.

In terms of economics, Mary's act makes no sense whatsoever. In kingdomnomics, though, extravagant love makes perfect sense. So this morning, listen to one more lesson on kingdomnomics, and the value extravagant love.

## **I. Extravagant Love Always Costs Something**

The first lesson in kingdomnomics we see from this story is extravagant love always costs you something. Mary saw Jesus as worthy of the very best she could give him. In her case it was a bottle of pure Nard.

#### **A. Financial Cost**

First there was the financial cost. Pure Nard was an extravagant luxury item that was prized throughout the ancient world for a variety of reasons. This nard came from either India or China, so just getting it to Israel incurred tremendous cost. It was used in medicines, as a flavoring for wine, a breath freshener, and as a perfume both for the body and for clothes. It is known by its lightness, the redness of its color, its sweet smell, which is likened to gladiolas, and a taste which leaves behind a pleasant flavor. It was often diluted with additives in order to increase its weight, make it go further, or stretch a merchant's profit margin.<sup>i</sup> However, Mary's nard was no cut-rate, watered down, New York street vendor knock-off. This was the real deal. John tells us this was "*pure nard.*" Only the best for Jesus.

Different translations say different things about the amount. Some say pound. Some say pint. It was a Roman pound, just about 12 ounces. The NIV in verse 5 says it was worth about a year's wages. The Greek literally says 300 denarii. Since a denarii was the average day's pay, 300 would be about the annual income once you factored in the feast days and Sabbath days you didn't work. Imagine taking what you make in a year, and blowing it all in one single, extravagant act of worship. Can you even imagine doing such a thing? If you were to do it? What would it look like? How would you worship with your 30, 40, 50, or 60 thousand dollars?

This was a huge sum of money for anyone to have, especially a 1<sup>st</sup> Century Jewish woman. We're not told how Mary came to have such a precious item. Was her family wealthy? The shocked response of the guests would suggest that such a thing was not to be expected from her. Perhaps it was a family heirloom, or it served as a tangible holding for her life savings. Wherever it came from, this represented a mammoth financial expenditure for Mary.

#### **B. Social Cost**

But her extravagant love was more than just the financial outlay for Mary. There was a huge social cost, as well. The shock comes not only from what she gave, but how she gave it. Women simply did not let their hair down in public. This was a violation of every social custom. The only one in polite Jewish society who ever saw a woman with her hair let down was her husband. As Gary Burge writes in his commentary on John, "Mary is acting with abandon, extravagant abandon."<sup>ii</sup>

Letting her hair down is only the beginning of the scandal. Look what she does with it in 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.*

As I mentioned earlier, we know from the other gospels she actually poured it over his head and body. John focuses on the feet either because she wiped them with her hair, or because in the very next chapter John will tell us how Jesus himself would wash the disciples' feet.

To wipe Jesus' feet with her hair, rather than a towel, would have been seen as a tremendously intimate act. This would have been wholly inappropriate and improper for her to do. This would be the stuff on rumors and water cooler talk for weeks to come. Jesus didn't care. He knew her heart. Obviously, he knew she meant nothing inappropriate by it. He knew it was coming from a place of love and grace in her heart.

Here's the thing, when you've been deeply touched by the grace of God, you can't help but respond in ways that make no sense to the world. God's love and God's grace will make you do things that world says, "Huh? What's going on there? That doesn't make any sense." But how often have we backed down from loving Jesus extravagantly, because of our fear of what others would think? How often do we only act with a wimpy, reluctant love because of what someone else might say? As long as there is someone or something worth more to us than Jesus, then we will never love him extravagantly. Whatever you love most, you will love most extravagantly.

## **II. There is Always a Good Reason for not Loving Extravagantly**

This leads us right to a second lesson in kingdomomics we can learn from this account, and that is this: there is always a good reason for not love Jesus extravagantly. To love extravagantly, there's will be a cost, and there will always be good sounding reasons not to pay that cost.

Imagine when Mary first starts to anoint Jesus, there is stunned silence in the room. Then as the full extent of her audacity becomes apparent, there are audible gasps. Then you hear the murmurs and the whispers. Finally, there is the outright grumbling.

The economics of the kingdom run so counter to the values of this world, that when heaven's values are lived out in the midst of this world and its soul-sucking values it, has a shocking impact. It sends out shockwaves in every direction.

John only mentions Judas' reaction. But Matthew tells us that all the disciples were indignant. Mark says, "Some of those present were saying indignantly to one another, 'Why this waste of perfume?'" and it says "they," plural, "rebuked her sharply." Their shock at the waste of such costly perfume only underscores for us the extravagance of Mary's act. So, Judas is merely expressing what all the others were thinking.

John also makes it clear, though, that Judas isn't really concerned with the poor. Verses 5 and 6 say,

<sup>5</sup>*“Why wasn't this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year's wages.”* <sup>6</sup>*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.*

That doesn't mean, though, that everyone in that room had an ulterior motive. They all didn't have access to the money bag. Some of them were probably legitimately concerned about the best use of that money. Were they wrong? Couldn't that money have been used for lots of very good things? Sure, it could have.

Although she didn't know the details, Mary recognized the significance of what Jesus was about to do. The disciples didn't get it. Jesus had told them time and time again, but they still didn't have a clue. But Mary got it. She knew that Jesus was about to lay down his life.

The three times we meet Mary in the gospels up close and personal we find her in the same place, at the feet of Jesus. We see this in the previous chapter after Lazarus dies. Jesus comes to town, and we find Mary at the feet of Jesus pouring her heart out, “Lord, if only you had been here.” On another occasion, Jesus is over for dinner. Martha is in the kitchen cooking up a storm, and she's mad that her sister isn't helping her. Where do we find Mary? She's at the feet of Jesus listening and learning, and I imagine her with a quill and scroll taking notes. She's taking in every word to her heart and mind. And so we find her here at Jesus' feet anointing him.

There was a prophetic aspect to what Mary was doing. Anointing with perfume was a part of the traditional Jewish burial rite. Mary didn't want to wait until Jesus was dead to demonstrate how much she loved him. She wanted him to know while he was still alive.

Interestingly, she would never get another chance. Do you remember why the ladies were going to the tomb on Sunday morning after Jesus died? They were taking burial spices to properly prepare his body for burial. Perfume would have been a part of that mixture. They had been unable to prepare the body after taking him down from the cross, because it was almost time for the Sabbath to begin, and Jewish religious laws would allow them to prepare the body for burial on the Sabbath. But they never were able to prepare the body, because there was no body. Mary didn't even know the full significance of what she was doing, but she knew what Jesus was worth to her? She knew he was worth extravagant love.

Matthew tells us that Jesus calls what Mary did a “beautiful thing.” Extravagant acts of love, acts of beauty, and worship, and praise always seem wasteful from a certain point of view. Couldn't you do

something more useful with that time? Couldn't you do something more important? Why can't that money be spent on something that makes a difference.

There is always something wasteful about love. People don't show their love in extravagant ways because they are being practical. What's practical about a dozen roses? What does a diamond ring accomplish? The money spent on a beautiful wedding could always be more practically spent on a new car for the couple or a new house. Why the extravagant waste?

Because of love. Love sees a worth in things that defies simple accounting. Love understands a value beyond dollars. A boy showers a girl with gifts, and he wastes inordinate amounts of time with her, and carefully crafts prose, poetry and lyric because in her he sees a worth beyond reason. Such is God's love for us, and so should be our love for him.

Much has been made of Jesus' response to these concerns. *"You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me."* On the one hand, some have said this means that Mary's extravagant overture of love was justifiable in this one instance only. Never would such a lavish outpouring be appropriate in any other time or place, because Jesus only died this once.

Others have taken this to be some sort of pronouncement about poverty and the impossibility of our being able to do anything to fix it. It has been an excuse for many believers to not help the poor and needy as they should. I think both extremes miss the point.

First of all, Jesus wasn't giving a description of how the world should be, but how it is. As the people of God, we should always be pointing to a better way. We are called to demonstrate God's love for the poor and the downtrodden. While it is true that we will never fully solve this problem until Jesus returns, we always need to demonstrate that Jesus is and will be the ultimate solution. Secondly, Jesus isn't giving all the people in that room a reason not to help the poor, but an explanation as to why Mary wasn't. I find it interesting that none of them were taking a collection for the poor with their own funds. They were simply criticizing someone else's use of their own resources. It's always easier to judge how someone else uses their money.

Jesus was very likely referring to the Old Testament law in Dt. 15:11 which says, *"For there will never cease to be poor in the land."* This was not intended as a reason not to give. In fact, it says just the opposite, for here is the verse in full, *"For there will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be openhanded toward your fellow Israelites who are poor and needy in your land."*

This is Jesus' meaning here, *"There will always be poor you can help."* This is brought out quite clearly in Mark's account which quotes Jesus more fully, *"The poor you will always have with you, and you can help them any time you want. But you will not always have me (Mk. 4:17)."*

However, is there any way in which Mary's act serves as example for us. No, we can't anoint Jesus with perfume. No, we can't prepare him for his death and burial. But we can give him the best of our love. We can give him the best of our time, our talents or treasures. We can give him our best without fear of what others may think or say. We can perform extravagant acts of beauty and kindness, and when people ask why we do such a thing, like Mary, we can point to the death of Jesus. I do this because God so loved the world that he sent his one and only Son. Whoever believes in him will not perish but will have eternal life.

What your extravagant love for Jesus will look like will be different for each one you. For one person, it might be serving in a ministry and loving extravagantly through that ministry. It might be coaching a little league team, not because you're passionate about sports, but because you want to love those kids with the love of Jesus. It might mean giving up a lucrative career to go to the mission field. It might mean taking in a foster child.

Think of our Savior's love for us. Think of what it cost him to demonstrate that love. That didn't make sense. The only explanation is that our Heavenly Father loved us with an indescribable love. Think of all the things Jesus could have come to earth to do. He could have travelled the entire globe imparting wisdom and knowledge and truth wherever a crowd would gather to listen. He could have visited the sick beds and the leper colonies and healing all the disease in the world. He could have fed 5,000 after 5,000, after 5,000 until all the hurting and hungry of the world were well and well fed. But that wouldn't have saved us. That wouldn't have given us what we needed most. So, God poured out his love extravagantly. He didn't just give a little bit, a little dab here and a little dab there, but he broke the bottle, the body of his Son was broken on the cross, and every last ounce of his love was poured out so that you may know him, and be with him.

Mary is merely acting out what she knows in her heart. She knows that she loves Jesus with all that she has, so now she loves him literally with all that she has. If you're a Christian, you've supposedly given him your life. But do we really love him with all that we are. Too many Christians are like the guy who bought an engagement ring for his special girl. He told the jeweler to inscribe the inside of the ring with these words, "For the only girl I could ever love." The jeweler asked, "Do you want her name on it." The young man answered, "No, that way if she says, 'No,' I can give it to someone else." He wasn't all in.

Are you all in.

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<sup>i</sup> Pliny, *Natural History* 12.24-26

<sup>ii</sup> Burge, Gary M. John: From Biblical Text ... to Contemporary Life. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2000. 339. Print.