

OUR BEST FOR CHRIST

Matthew 26:6-13

Mark 14:3-9, John 12:1-9

The well-ordered home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus in the little town of Bethany was much to the liking of Christ. It was a home of true family love, and one in which Christ was a welcome and frequent guest. There He always found relaxation and encouragement.

On Tuesday before the Lord Jesus Christ was put to death on Friday, He went out to Bethany to spend the night in the home of these three friends. That evening a feast was given in His honor in the house of Simon, whom Christ had previously healed of his leprosy. It was his leprosy that had driven him to the Saviour and led to his vital experience of the miraculous power of the Son of God. Prior to his being cleansed of his leprosy life was a weary and dreary battle for Simon. What a happy day it was for him when he heard the blessed words of the Saviour: "Be ye whole again." When Simon received from Christ what he needed, he did not regard the relationship between himself and the Saviour as being ended. Simon was so grateful to his Benefactor that he threw open his house, staged a big party, and invited Christ to be the guest of honor at the feast. He wanted all of his neighbors and various other people to share with him his great joy and to know the One Who was responsible for it. Simon invited his and our Lord to this feast because He was loved and His presence was desired. This feast was given in honor of Christ out of grateful love for what He had done for Simon in cleansing him of his leprosy.

Among those present at this dinner party, in addition to Christ Who was soon to be offered for the redemption of His people, were our Lord's disciples and close friends, timid, yet hopeful; happy, yet wondering. One whose presence must have added much to the warmth and joy of this occasion was hard-working Martha. Even though the feast was not given in her home, Martha was in charge and was doing the serving, which was the very kind of thing which she could do so well, and which she enjoyed immensely. Instead of sending to Jerusalem for a caterer, Simon had wisely secured Martha, his own good friend and also the devoted friend of Christ to render this service. So she was doing what she enjoyed and what she could do best. Another who was present was Lazarus. Not long before that death had removed Lazarus from the scene of action, after which he had been wrapped in grave clothes and placed in a tomb. But the voice of Christ had called him and the power of Christ had brought him back from that world of mystery. How strange to see him sitting here at the table, filled with awe and gratitude for his having been loosed from the bonds of death at the command of Christ.

Present also on the memorable occasion was Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus. Mary had been very close to Christ. Often and intimately she had talked with Him in her home. On numerous occasions she had sat at His feet and listened to His words of grace and truth which had meant so much to her. Christ had been with her in the deepest sorrow of her life, the death of her only brother; and, marvelous to say, He had raised Lazarus from the dead and had restored him to his place in their home at Bethany. There was such a warmth of gratitude and love in Mary's heart that she felt she could never do anything for the Lord that would express adequately her heart-felt gratitude for all His goodness and kindness to her. Having been told that her wonderful Lord would be put to death, her keen intuition convinced her that this was the last opportunity she would have to express her great love for Him.

Mary possessed an alabaster box of ointment of spikenard which was one pound in weight and very expensive in cost. It was valued at "three hundred denarii." This amount equaled approximately one entire year's wages of a day laborer, or a woman's earnings for two years. Whether Mary had procured it from a merchant or it had been bequeathed to her we do not know. Whether she had treasured it for a longer or shorter time we cannot say. It may have been very precious to her for sentimental reasons as well as very costly in terms of purchase.

There were at least four choices open to Mary in her use of the contents of the alabaster box. First, she could have used it entirely on herself. This is exactly what many do with the alabaster boxes of their hearts and lives. Second, she could have poured it on some loved one or loved ones other than Christ. Third, she could have distributed it between herself and some other or others, either including or excluding Christ as a part-sharer. Fourth, she could have devoted it exclusively to her Lord, which was exactly what she did.

I. What Did Mary Do For Christ?

While the meal progressed, Mary, not caring what anybody might think, say, or do, resorted to a device of her own planning to pay grateful homage to Christ. Disregarding the custom of her day that a woman should not enter a room where men were feasting except for the purpose of serving, Mary went into the presence of Christ, who with the others was reclining at the table, and broke the seal of the alabaster box of the precious ointment of spikenard and poured its contents on Christ's head and feet. Instead of trusting this unusual deed to somebody else Mary did it herself. Since Martha was serving the dinner, Mary could have requested her to anoint the Lord Jesus. Lazarus was at the table and doubtless would have been delighted to anoint Christ for Mary. But this noble deed was so personal and sacred that she could not trust others to do it for her. She did it with her own hands.

II. Why Did Mary Do What She Did For Christ?

When she anointed her Lord, Mary was not seeking a place in the limelight. She was not seeking to win the applause of the crowd. She was not striving for fame. She was not selfishly struggling to have herself remembered. Why then did she do it?

1. To express her reverence for Christ.

With her it was not the mere sentimental adoration of an idol. In His sublime manhood she had recognized God incarnate. Therefore, she felt that she must worship Him. When she poured out that ointment on His head and feet it was to honor Him personally. Every drop of it was used out of reverence for Him.

2. To express her gratitude to Christ.

After Lazarus had died and all seemed hopeless, Christ had come and brought him back from the dead. For the restoration of her brother to life Mary was grateful to Christ beyond her ability to express in words. It was not required for her to do what she did. Her action in expressing her gratitude was spontaneous and voluntary.

3. To express her love for Christ.

Mary's love for Christ was such that she was not content to show Him only ordinary attention. Her love for Him sought out something additional whereby to express its intensity. Doubtless the ointment which she had was the most valuable of all her earthly possessions. It was very costly, but she freely poured it out. Her love delighted to lavish the best it could command upon the object of its affection. Mary did not stop to count the cost of what she was doing. She anointed her Lord as an expression of her great love for Him. It was a self-denying and sacrificial act. She did it without any talking about it either before or after.

Behold Mary crouched at the feet of Christ, kissing those feet which she had anointed and wiping them with her hair! It did not matter to her what people thought or said. It was not slave-like, but rather utter adoration and devotion — it was true worship expressing gratitude and love, because all she was and had were the result of His grace.

It is not hard for us to do things for those whom we really love. Mary expressed her love for Christ. You can always tell how much people love Christ by how much they allow His honor to cost them. How much of their time, energies, and possessions have they put into it? What shall we say of our failure to do things for Him? Can we expect the world to think that we love Christ when we do so little for Him?

Certain traits were exemplified by Mary which illustrate all true dedication to Christ. Lip-service was not enough; she must give. The cheap was not enough; she must give the costly. A part was not enough; she must give all. The unbroken was not enough; it must be outpoured.

There is something very beautiful, touching, and instructive about what Mary did. Mary wanted to do something for Christ while He lived. How much better it was that she anointed Him while He was yet alive, rather than waiting until He had died! Blessed indeed is the person who does the right thing at the right time and in the right way. There was not much that Mary could do for Christ, but what she could do that she did. Mary threw her flowers in the Lord's pathway, as it were, instead of keeping them to put on His grave. She did not keep her precious ointment for His cold, dead body, but she poured it on His head and feet as a token of love for Him while He could benefit by it. What a timely act of kindness and love! The kind things we mean to say or do for others should be said or done before they leave us. We all know that this is the right thing to do, and it is a pity and a tragedy that we do not do as well as we know.

III. What Were The Results Of What Mary Did For Christ?

1. Criticism.

Automatically the entire house was filled with the aroma of the fragrant ointment. Some of those present did not understand. In fact, they were embarrassed because they did not think that what she had done was in good taste. Unreserved adoration and devotion were as uncommon then as they are today. Murmurs of surprise and astonishment, and expressions of criticism were voiced by those who were indignant. There were far more frowns than smiles. However, the fault lay with those who complained about Mary's gracious deed and not with her.

Judas did not have the slightest admiration for Mary's deed. He regarded it as an act of senseless extravagance. To him it was so much money thrown away; three hundred denarii squandered for nothing. Judas, who meant every word that he said, and the disciples who, perhaps thoughtlessly, chimed in with him, thought they were far superior to Mary in business sense, but were in reality far inferior to her in dedication to Christ. They remarked, "This has been an extravagance that is uncalled for. Just think if we had expended this money to feed the poor!" It is very doubtful if they had been digging down in their pockets to feed the poor, but now by this example of sacrificial love they were made very uncomfortable and sought to turn the point away by a feigned humanitarianism. All of the disciples joined in the criticism, according to Matthew, but Judas objected the most because he was pilfering the money that had been placed in the Lord's treasury. There are so many people in the churches today who are taking the Lord's money, and they are frequently quite critical when some of God's children contribute generously to the work of the Lord. Do you steal from God? "Will a man rob God? Yet ye have robbed me. But ye say, Wherein have we robbed thee? In tithes and offerings. Ye are cursed with a curse: for ye have robbed me, even this whole nation. Bring ye all the tithes into the storehouse, that there may be meat in mine house, and prove me now herewith, saith the Lord of hosts, if I will not open you the windows of heaven, and pour you out a blessing, that there shall not be room enough to receive it" (Malachi 3:8-10).

In the eyes of the critics two things were wrong with Mary's gift. They said it was too costly for the use to which it was put, and not charitable enough in the use which was made of it. In other words, it was too costly to be used for Christ, and too costly not to be used for the poor. They simply branded it as an act of reckless extravagance and fantastic devotion. However, it must ever be remembered that nothing is wasted if it is done for Christ. To Judas Mary's deed was reprehensible, but to Christ it was beautiful.

2. Commendation.

Upon hearing the harsh and unkind criticism of Mary, our Lord quickly defended her. Her act of worship was criticized by men, but it was praised by the Lord. The fact that what she had done pleased the Lord was enough. Oh, to be able to receive from the Lord of Glory a commendation for how we have worshiped Him! Do you think that you will really hear Him say, "Well done, good and faithful servant"?

Christ commanded Mary's critics to let her alone. Moreover, He said: "She has done a beautiful thing." Christ recognizes true beauty, for He is the master of the beautiful and the gracious. It was impulsive, and it was expensive, but it was also beautiful. Christ added that Mary had wrought a good work upon Him, and that she had done the best that she could for Him. Thus He taught that one should be very careful not to interfere with those who are worshiping and serving Him.

Christ's statement of appreciation and commendation, "She hath done what she could," compensated for all the loss, all the humiliation, and all the criticism which her deed called forth. What a peace came to Mary's mind when her act of worship was accepted by the Lord, with the assurance that her motives were understood and that her unique expression of devotion fitted in so perfectly with the emotions that were in His heart in view of all that He was to suffer in the immediate future. Her deed was memorable because it was prompted by a great love for Christ.

Nowhere do we find such strong praises bestowed on any person, who is mentioned in the Gospels, as Mary received from the lips of Christ. No stronger word of commendation could have been used than "She hath done what she could." Very few really deserve to have it said of them that they have done all that it was possible for them to do. Capacity is the measure of obligation. Beyond a doubt, Mary would have done more for Christ if she could have done so. By His very admission, her love was greater than her ability to express it. She did not try to do what somebody else could do, but only what she could do. That was all that Christ expected of her and it is all that He expects of any of us. Our Master will never ask us what we have done with what somebody else had, but He will call us to account for what we have done with what we have had. Every one of us must give an account of himself to God.

What else did Christ say? He stated that Mary would be remembered for what she had done. The ministry of Mary was a memorialized one that will never die because it is tied to the gospel of Christ and makes her a partner with Him. She has been dead for centuries but her deed still lives to emphasize the death of Christ and the anointing of His body for death until it shall rise from the grave and be the pattern of the resurrected bodies of all the redeemed.

The odor that filled the house that day was soon dissipated, but Mary's deed is fragrant forever. "Wheresoever this gospel shall be preached throughout the whole world, this also that she hath done shall be spoken of for a memorial of her." It was an immortal deed. Christ ordained that it should be spoken of forever as a memorial of Mary and an example to all who should come after her.

As Mary of Bethany gave her best for Christ, so should we give our very best for Him. Christ deserves the best of everything -- the best hours of the day, the best years of our lives, the best words we can speak, the best songs we can sing, the best sermons we can preach and the best deeds we can do for Him, because He gave His best for us. If we will give Him our very best, we will certainly receive His appreciation and win His commendation. We, too, will be remembered for what we have done. It must have brought much joy to the heart of Mary when Christ told her that she would never be forgotten, and that the memory of her noble deed would last as long as the gospel of Christ. May God give us the love Mary had for her Lord and help us to show that love by doing what we can and all that we can for Him!