

Coming Home

“Part 4: Prioritizing Serving Christ”

Matthew 26:6-13

Delivered at Central Baptist Church on September 12, 2021

INTRODUCTION

- **(SHOW SLIDE 01)** We are doing a series entitled “Coming Home.” The idea was that we were supposed to be coming home after Covid ended. But of course, it is more like we are on our way home, but are not yet there.
 - The series still works just fine. The point is to talk about making sure we have our priorities right in life.
- Today I want to talk about serving Christ: having a heart to serve and pouring out our lives for him because we love him. To do this I want to look at this story about a woman who loves Jesus so much that she gets some very expensive oil and anoints his head with it. John also records this story and tells us that her name is Mary. This is Mary, the brother of Lazarus whom Jesus raised from the dead.
 - Those who saw it were not impressed by her actions. **(SHOW SLIDE 02) And when the disciples saw it, they were indignant, saying, “Why this waste?” (Mt 26:8)**
 - **“What was the point in doing that Mary? It’s too extravagant.” (SHOW TITLE SLIDE 03)** We use that word “extravagant” in a negative sense when someone spends too much money or dresses too expensively. In this sense “extravagant” means “wasteful.”
- Jesus spoke against being too extravagant or wasteful like when he condemned the rich man who spent all his money on himself and did not give a penny to the poor man at his gate.
 - Jesus spoke of the prodigal son who took his inheritance and wasted it all in wild and extravagant living.
 - Jesus warned against wasting the opportunities that God gives you lest you be found unprepared when he comes back, like the man who buried his master’s money in the ground instead of investing it.
- In other words, Jesus did not like wasteful extravagance. And yet when the disciples rebuked Mary for her wasteful extravagance, Jesus said, **(SHOW SLIDE 04) Why do you trouble the woman? For she has done a beautiful thing to me. (Mt 26:10)**
 - In fact, Jesus is so impressed that he says in verse 13: **(SHOW SLIDE 05) Truly, I say to you, wherever this gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will also be told in memory of her. (Mt 26:13)**
 - So, whatever the story is about, it is clear that Jesus is very impressed by her extravagance and apparent wastefulness. **(SHOW TITLE SLIDE 06)**
- Let’s look at four things this morning. First, an extravagant God. Second, a right response to God’s extravagance. Third, a wrong response to God’s extravagance. Finally, how the greatest “waste” in history can change our hearts.

AN EXTRAVAGANT GOD

- So why did Jesus praise Mary for anointing his head and Luke also says his feet with this expensive perfume? In the first place, we can see that Jesus is impressed because her action reflects **(SHOW SLIDE 07) An extravagant God.**
 - Have you ever thought of how extravagant God is? Again, we can use the word “extravagant” in a negative sense to mean wasteful, but it can also have a positive sense to refer to extreme generosity. When someone gives millions of dollars away we praise them for their “extravagant gift.”
 - So, what seems wasteful because it is so over the top can actually be extravagant generosity.
- **(SHOW TITLE SLIDE 08)** Is God not “wasteful” in this sense? We won’t dwell on this very long because it is not the main point, but it is worth lingering on for a moment. Think of how “wasteful” God is creating the universe.
 - God did not just create our one sun and planets. He created the whole Milky Way Galaxy with its 100 billion stars. And yet the Milky Way is only one tiny galaxy among the 100s of billions of galaxies in the universe each one with 100’s of billions of stars.
 - We might say, **“God, this is way beyond what is necessary. No human has ever seen or will ever see the vast majority of what you made. Why this waste?”** Behold the extravagance of God!
- Or think of all the varieties of flowers and animals. Millions of them cover the planet and yet most flowers are never seen? We might say, “Why this waste?” Truly God’s acts in creation are over the top. There is far more than is needed.
 - We could say that all the wonders of the universe are like God breaking open the alabaster flask of his power and pouring out so much beauty and wonder that it is either a colossal waste or it is an expression of his extravagant love and power so that we stand in awe of our Creator.
- It is the same with our salvation. Here again, God is not stingy. He goes far beyond what any mind could define as generous. What could be more extravagant than giving up His own beloved Son, adopting us into his family, and making us his heirs?
 - Creation is God breaking open the alabaster flask and pouring it out.
 - Salvation is God breaking open the alabaster flask and pouring it out.
 - In these things we see that it is God’s nature to be extravagantly generous, to be over the top in his expressions of love, to be excessive in giving his gifts.
- Again, this is not the main point of this text, but it is behind it all. Jesus is so impressed with Mary’s extravagance because it reflects the extravagant character of God.

A RIGHT RESPONSE TO GOD’S EXTRAVAGANCE

- When a person sees who God is and what he has done in sending Christ, then this brings us to the second thing we see in this little story, which is **(SHOW SLIDE 09) A right response to God’s extravagance.**
 - How did Mary come to know of God’s extravagant love? Well, she has seen many of the things Jesus had done, but there was one thing Jesus had done for her in particular that was so over the top, and so wonderful, that it changed her

forever. Mary's brother was Lazarus. One day he got very sick. Mary sent for Jesus to come, believing Jesus could heal him. But Jesus got there too late and Lazarus died and was placed in a tomb. We all know the pain of losing someone we love. We have lost many wonderful people at our church this past year. This past week we lost Werner and Betty.

- **(SHOW TITLE SLIDE 10)** Four days later Jesus arrived. And he gave Mary a gift; a gift that showed who he was and what kind of power he had. Jesus stood before her brother's tomb and said, "Lazarus, come out!" And Lazarus came out. Can you imagine Mary's shock? Her joy? Her deep sorrow suddenly turned to celebration as Jesus restored her brother to her.
- Now fast forward a little in the story. John tell us that it was the week of Jesus' death and he came to a dinner at Mary's house in Bethany which is a little town just 3km from Jerusalem.
 - Mary is thinking, ***"What can I possibly give to Jesus for all he has done for me? What can I do for God's Messiah, the Saviour of the world? I must do something, but what?"*** Her heart is carried away with love and joy and she comes up with an idea.
 - In those days the host would anoint guests with cheap oil to put in their hair and on their feet. It's kind of like how we use perfume or cologne. Instead of grabbing the cheap oil, Mary runs to get her prized possession. Notice two things here.
- **(SHOW SLIDE 11)** First, **Mary gave Jesus her very best.**
 - This is no ordinary flask of perfume. First, it is in an alabaster flask. A very expensive container. Second, it is pure nard. That's a strange word to us, but to them it was not. It was an oil that was extracted from a nard plant in India. Third, it is a large flask. It is not one of the little sample perfume vials that you get. It is about 11 ounces, which is a big bottle. Fourth, it is expensive. Mark says it is worth 300 hundred denarii. That is how much a fully employed labourer would make in one year. So, in modern terms this bottle of ointment is worth around \$60,000. Mary might be a very wealthy woman or this may be a family heirloom.
 - **(SHOW TITLE SLIDE 12)** She didn't need to do all this. A cheap bottle of cologne would have been fine. Even a \$500 bottle of Chanel would have been amazing. Furthermore, she did not need to break the narrow neck of the flask and use it all up. She could have just poured it out 10 or 20 drops and saved the rest.
 - But she did not do this. She got the \$60,000 bottle of cologne and poured it all out on his hair and on his feet. Why such waste? Why so much extravagance?
- The answer is that she knows who Jesus is and she knows what he has done for her. To anoint with expensive oil is what they did to kings, like David. The word "Messiah" means "anointed one." Mary knows that Jesus is God's Messiah, the Son of King David, and the King over all. Nothing is too great to give to him. She gives him her very best.

- And so as we enter this fall, let us reflect on this. Let's set our priorities right at the beginning. How can we give Jesus our very best?
 - He is so worthy of it. He is worthy of our energy and time, not just a few drops of it. How can we serve others and be committed to our church family? He is worthy of our money and abilities, not just a few drops of the cheap stuff, but of our best. What of your very best can you give to Jesus as you enter this fall?
- But the second thing to notice in her right response is that **(SHOW SLIDE 13) Mary acted on her impulse to do something extravagant for Jesus.**
 - It was an impulsive act. To those watching it was way over the top. But to Mary, there was nothing to think about. She didn't need to write out a list of the pros and cons for acted on her idea.
 - To her, Jesus was so glorious that nothing was too great to give him. She had the impulse to do it and she followed through and did it.
- **(SHOW TITLE SLIDE 14)** Do we not need a bit more of Mary's spirit in our lives and in our church? We are often so logical. We are planners. We need to line up all the pros and cons before making a decision. That is of course a wise thing in most parts of life. But do we have a place for impulsive moments where our hearts are so taken up with Jesus that we simply must act and what we do might even seem crazy?
 - That is what love does. It's what makes a young man go spend far more money than he has on an engagement ring for his girlfriend. He's glad to do such an extravagant thing.
- Do you have an idea of something you want to do for Jesus? Then do it. Oh, I know Christians can sometimes be foolish.
 - But I confess that I sometimes fear that we are often more like the disciples who rebuke seemingly crazy acts done out of love for Christ than we are like Mary whose heart is so taken up with Christ that she must do something big to express her gratitude.
 - For her it was giving away so much wealth that people thought she was crazy. What is it for you?
- Note carefully that this story is sandwiched between two terrible stories. Right before it is the story of how the religious leaders plot to arrest and kill Jesus. And right after it is the story of Judas, one of Jesus' closest friends, agreeing to betray him for 30 pieces of silver.
 - And right in between the plotting of the religious leaders and the treachery of Judas is this beautiful little story. And Jesus says that **(SHOW SLIDE 15) In pouring this ointment on my body, she has done it to prepare me for burial. (Mt 26:12)**
 - A few days later they crucified Jesus. When they pierced his head with the crown of thorns, his hair still would have smelled of the oil.
 - When they drove the nails through his feet, the lingering scent of that oil would still have been on his feet.
 - And when they laid him in the tomb, his body smelled not only of blood and sweat but of the perfume that Mary anointed him with.

- Jesus was blessed by Mary's act. Do we bless his heart with our lives? This is the right response to God's extravagant love for us in sending His Son into the world.
 - A right response is to give our very best, to let love for him guide our hearts, to even do impulsive things like giving away huge amounts of wealth like Mary did, simply because Jesus is so glorious and so worthy that we gladly do it.

A WRONG RESPONSE TO GOD'S EXTRAVAGANCE

- **(SHOW SLIDE 16)** Third, a wrong response to God's extravagance.
 - We must now look at the criticism of those who were at this dinner where Mary anointed Jesus. They complained about the wastefulness of the ointment.
 - **(SHOW SLIDE 17)** . . . she poured it on his head as he reclined at table. ⁸ And when the disciples saw it, they were indignant, saying, "Why this waste? ⁹ For this could have been sold for a large sum and given to the poor."
- I think we have to be careful about condemning these men for their response. They are not necessarily selfish. They are trying to be wise. Their first reaction was to take this whole moment and convert it into dollars and cents.
 - **(SHOW TITLE SLIDE 18)** Do we not often do this as well? We think we are wise but we are actually stingy. Many of us know the dollar value of everything. And of course, wise people are good with money, but things of value cannot always be reduced a dollar figure.
 - Can you put a price on the joy of sharing a sunset with someone you love?
 - Can you assess the market value of holding a newborn baby?
 - Can you define the share price of a paramedic saving someone's life?
 - In the same, when you see who Jesus is there is nothing so valuable that you hold it back. True wisdom is not keeping all your money, abilities, and time locked away in a cabinet. True wisdom is pouring it out for Christ.
- John's gospel also adds another insight. John says the complaint started with Judas. John 12:6 says, **(SHOW SLIDE 19)** [Judas] 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. (Jn 12:6)
 - The other disciples were sincere but wrong. Judas is just wrong. Judas criticizes Mary as a smokescreen for his own gain. Judas wanted it sold so he could steal some of it.
- **(SHOW TITLE SLIDE 20)** Mary's extravagant and seemingly wasteful act caused others to become upset. Her great act revealed their stingy hearts. This kind of over the top generosity made them uncomfortable and so they had to shoot it down. Why this waste?
 - And so it is today wherever true believers who love Christ show Mary's spirit. As long as your religious beliefs and actions seem reasonable people will accept you. But as soon as you start taking Jesus really seriously, devoting time to studying the Bible, giving away large amounts of money, volunteering many

hours in the church, or things like this, then people even within the church will say, ***“You’re taking this too seriously. You’re acting a bit crazy. By all means, do some of this but don’t sacrifice everything in your life.”***

- Ah but to those who know the glory of Jesus we may respond with the words of David Livingstone. He was the great explorer and missionary of the 19th century. He sacrificed everything and suffered a lot to take the gospel to the people in Africa. At the end of his life he gave an address to some students at Cambridge and he said this:
 - **(SHOW SLIDE 21)** ***“People talk of the sacrifice I have made in spending so much of my life in Africa. . . . Is that a sacrifice which brings its own blest reward in healthful activity, the consciousness of doing good, peace of mind, and a bright hope of a glorious destiny hereafter? Away with the word “sacrifice” used like this. It is emphatically no sacrifice. (SHOW SLIDE 22) Say rather it is a privilege. Anxiety, sickness, suffering, or danger, now and then, with a loss of the common conveniences and enjoyments of this life, may make us pause, and cause the spirit to waver, and the soul to sink; but let this only be for a moment. All these are nothing when compared with the glory which shall be revealed in and for us. I never made a sacrifice.”***
- Mary would have said the same thing of her \$60,000 bottle of ointment. When you see how glorious Jesus is and when you see all that he has done for us and will one day give to us, it is all worth it.
 - **(SHOW TITLE SLIDE 23)** It’s why we will sing, ***“What a beautiful Name it is/The Name of Jesus Christ my King.***
 - And once we have sung that, we go on to sing, ***“Take my life and let it be/Consecrated Lord to Thee. . . Take my silver and my gold, not a might would I withhold/Take my intellect and use every power as You choose . . . Take myself and I will be ever, only, all for Thee”***
 - As we enter this fall, let us use your time, our money, our strength for Christ. He is worth it all.

HOW THE GREATEST “WASTE” IN HISTORY CAN CHANGE OUR HEARTS

- It is right here though that we say, ***“how do I get a heart that really loves Jesus so I give him my all?”*** And even when this, many of us feel that we have tried to serve Christ but see so little in terms of results.
 - So many Christians feel discouraged because even though they have tried to serve Christ, life circumstances have been against them and they don’t think they have done very much.
 - Sooner or later we turn to Jesus and groan saying, ***“You have given me much but I seem to have achieved so little. Why this waste?”***
 - So how can we get hearts that follow through on pouring out our lives for Jesus and how do we stay encouraged in doing this when it seems our efforts are often wasted?
- In the final place then let’s look at **(SHOW SLIDE 24)** **How the greatest “waste” in history can change our hearts.**

- If ever there was a life that seemed wasted it was that of Jesus. The Bible declares that Jesus is the eternal Son of God in human flesh. That He is none other than our Creator.
 - And yet, God in human flesh spent the first thirty years of his life swinging a hammer and making furniture. Why this waste?
 - Jesus came to launch the kingdom of God, and yet he never went to the centre of power, which was the city of Rome. Why this waste?
 - He came to accomplish a mission that was so big it would take a thousand years, and yet he died in his mid-thirties. Why this waste?
 - He was born to be a king and yet they hung him on a cross. From one perspective we might look at God becoming a man only to be murdered as an utter waste.
- **(SHOW TITLE SLIDE 25)** And yet right here is the secret to it all. What appears as an utter waste is no waste at all.
 - In breaking the alabaster flask of his life and pouring out his blood, he washed away our sins.
 - In breaking the alabaster flask of his life and pouring out his blood, he conquered the evil powers.
 - In breaking the alabaster flask of his life and pouring out his blood, he defeated death itself.
 - Jesus did not give us only a drop of his blood. He poured out this life to the last drop and the result is that all those who believe in him will enter a world that no longer smells of death and violence, a world that no longer reeks of the injustice of 215 children in graves, a world that no longer makes us nauseous from the smell of sexual abuse, spousal abuse, and racism.
 - Jesus poured out his life so that one day the whole house of this world will be transformed so we breathe in the sweet smell of forgiveness, joy, peace, and justice.
- What will give you this heart that Mary had? Seeing Jesus for who he is and what he has done. When you see him, your heart will be so moved that you will do anything and give up anything for him – not because you have to, but because he is so worthy, and in the end you will say you never made a sacrifice.
 - And when you feel discouraged because you tried to serve him but it feels like your little life has not accomplished much, then look to the cross. To some eyes it looks like a defeat, but it is a victory. To some eyes it looks like a waste, but it is the greatest act in history.
 - So also, as you pour out your life and like Mary seek to find ways to bless Jesus' heart, God will use your small efforts for his purposes. One day he will show you how your actions filled the world with a sweet smell and he will say to you and to everyone else, "you have done a beautiful thing to me."