

Text: John 12:1-11

Title: "Believe because He was anointed for burial"

Time: 5/4/2025 am

Place: NBBC

Introduction: High in the Himalayas of Northeast India a plant grows called *Nardostachys jatamansi*. Its roots are steam distilled to extract a fragrant essential oil called *spike-nard* or simply *nard-oil*.

Because of the remoteness and altitude of its natural environment, the plant was difficult to harvest in the first century. Once harvested, its roots had to be dried and ground into powder before the intricate distillation process could begin. Like our maple syrup experts in our region, the distillation of nard-oil involved intricate expertise and craftsmanship.

Because of the cost of harvesting, processing, and shipping this substance to market, ownership of nard-oil was a symbol of great wealth in Jesus's day. One commentator even called it a sign of opulence in the first century world.

In addition to its application as perfume, ancient societies prized the ointment for some medicinal uses. It has antimicrobial, anti-inflammatory, and antioxidant properties, and it has been used since ancient times to promote relaxation, stress reduction, and better sleep.

This is the oil of our passage this morning (v. 3). Other Gospel accounts tell us that Mary anointed the head of Jesus. Here, John tells us that Mary also anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped the residue away with her hair. Perhaps she felt in this act some solidarity with the woman of sin who washed Jesus's feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair in Luke 7:38.

Letting down her hair at a public meal like this would have been considered improper for a lady in first century Palestine, but Mary was not thinking of customary proprieties. In an act of self-forgetting devotional love for her Savior, she applies the costly ointment filling the room with aromatics, which she hoped would bring some comfort and healing to Christ during a very stressful time of His ministry (11:53, 57).

The other Gospel accounts of this event emphasize how please Christ was with His servant's devotion. They tell us that Jesus promised, "Verily I say unto you, 'Whosoever this gospel shall be preached in the whole world, there shall also this, that this woman hath done, be told for a memorial of her'" (Matt. 26:13). And so, we have gathered this morning in New Boston, NH, nearly 2000 years after Christ made that promise, to remember again Mary's anointing of the Lord Jesus in Bethany. Heaven and earth may pass away, but Jesus's words shall never pass away.

Our account here in John, however, lacks this emphasis on Mary's example. He does not mention the way Jesus honored Mary's act with His promise. Instead, John designs his description of the event in line with the purpose of his Gospel, which we have seen all along, that we readers should believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and believing have life in His name.

According to this account, we must believe because Jesus was anointed as John describes here. John sees in this event a great gospel witness that challenges us to repent of our unbelief and instead believe. I want us to see three challenges to believe that John's account confronts us with this morning.

I. Mary's anointing challenges us to believe that people are more valuable than money (vv. 1-6).

Illustration: The 1993 film *Schindler's List* is about a German business man, Oskar Schindler, whose employment of Jews during the Third Reich saved 1100 of them from the death camps of the Holocaust. In the final scene of the film, thankful Jews present Schindler with a ring that had an inscription on the inside that read, "The one who saves one life saves the world."

After a handshake, Schindler begins to lament that he could have saved more Jews than he did. He begins to think of how much money he had thrown away, which could have been used to bribe the Germans to release other Jews: ten more if only he had sold his car. The pin on his lapel was worth two people. His employees try comforting him as he laments, "I could have saved one more person."

Application: Mary believed that her Lord was the Savior who saved one life and who would save the world. That one life was her brother Lazarus. Verse 3 literally reads, "Therefore, Mary took a pound of ointment." It was because Lazarus was sitting at her table that she did what she did (vv. 1-2).

As Mary contemplated what it meant to have her brother back with the family, what was the value of that one life and the moments she could share again with him, she lost any respect for the calculation of the value of the ointment she was determined to use to thank her Lord for this miracle of life and to help Him through threats of death.

Judas Iscariot, of course, remembered the calculation that Mary ignored. The other Gospels tell us that he was not alone in his miscalculation of the relative value of moments

with Lazarus versus the value of the costly nard-oil. Other disciples agreed that Mary's act was wasteful.

But whereas they may have been genuinely concerned about the poor, John tells us that this was not the case for Judas (v. 6, *bare* = *carried away*). Judas was a covetous thief. He cared not that Lazarus was at the table, he cared not that Jesus's life was threatened, and he cared not even for the poor whom he professed to care for. He cared only for himself.

Judas calculated that the nard-oil could bring 300 denarii if sold at market price. That was a year's wage. The median annual household income in New Hampshire is around \$95,000. I can think of a lot of projects, both in the work of the Lord and not, that would put \$95,000 to good use many times over. No doubt, you could too.

But this line of thinking was not available to Mary, because she was overwhelmed with thankfulness for the Resurrection and the Life, the One who had brought her brother back to life again. Very simply, she believed that life was more valuable than even this amount of money.

So are we more like Mary or more like Judas when it comes to the values we place on people and money? This question is especially pertinent when we think of the new eternal life people need in Christ. Do we see how much more valuable is the life that Jesus can give vs. the money we can possess?

Can we see what Oskar Schindler saw, that his car was worth 10 people? While it is true that we are not faced with the horror of the Hitler's Holocaust, is it not true that we live among a people on the broad road that leads to destruction? Have we calculated correctly the value of each of those souls that needs saving? What are we willing to part with to advance the cause of saving them?

Mary's anointing challenges us to believe that people are more valuable than money.

II. Mary's anointing challenges us to believe that worshipping Jesus is more important than helping the poor (vv. 7-8).

Illustration: Through the new Department of Government Efficiency, we have come to learn about shocking waste, fraud, and abuse in Washington D.C. Imagine that at the next DOGE news conference, it is brought to light that a federal bureaucrat spent \$95,000 on a bottle of expensive ointment that could have gone to the relief of homelessness.

We would be shocked again. We would be critical of the bureaucrat's arrogance and selfishness, to think that he deserved these funds for such an unproductive purpose more than the basic needs of those who are homeless on the streets. We would say that the bureaucrat is no better than those who are poor and in need. In fact, we would say that he is far worse.

Application: But we do not come to that conclusion about Jesus here, when He accepts the \$95,000 ointment that was given to Him instead of to the poor. Instead, Jesus clearly teaches that giving \$95,000 to the poor would have been a worse use of those funds than the use Mary put them to.

One commentator noted in this regard: "Were a mere mortal to claim such priority, he would be very ill or unspeakably arrogant" (Carson, 430). Jesus was neither ill nor unspeakably arrogant for one simple reason – He was no mere mortal. He was God. Because He is who He is, worshipping Jesus is more important than caring for the poor.

Jesus tells His disciples that they always have the poor with them. Deut. 15:11 tells Israel the same truth, and it told them

what to do about it: "For the poor shall never cease out of the land: therefore I command thee, saying, Thou shalt open thine hand wide unto thy brother, to thy poor, and to thy needy, in thy land." Jesus obeyed that law perfectly. God wants us to meet the needs of people we know who need help, and Jesus certainly did this (John 13:29).

Clearly, the Bible teaches two things when it comes to the needs of the poor: (1) we will not eradicate poverty, and (2) poverty is an opportunity for haves to help the have-nots with their own money, not with the money of someone else.

But in this episode, Jesus claims two truths that are even more important than what the Bible teaches about helping poor people. (1) He teaches the truth that He is God. And (2) He teaches us that as God, He would die and be buried. This is the gospel, the good news of salvation. Our God, who is worthy of our worship, loved us in spite of our sins, became a man, died in our place for our sins, rose again, and ascended to the right hand of the Father. The name of our God is Jesus, for He saves His people from their sins.

Mary could not see all of this about Jesus at the time, and Judas certainly missed it, but Jesus saw it perfectly well. He tells Judas to leave Mary alone, to let her keep what she had left of the ointment, so that she could use it soon to bury Him. She undoubtedly brought some that resurrection Sunday morning, only to find that she did not need it after all. The Resurrection and the Life was not in His tomb.

Because Jesus is God and because He died for our sins, worshipping Jesus is more important than helping the poor. Do we believe this? Many religions today make much of the help they give to the poor, all the while preaching a false gospel that fails to worship and adore Christ as God and Savior. We must never advocate a socialized gospel.

III. Mary's anointing challenges us to believe that Jesus can use us too (vv. 9-11).

Application: Mary's simple act of devotion to Christ made a big difference again this morning. Just as Jesus promised, our hearts have been challenged to believe because of what she did. Undoubtedly, her act of worship has done the same for millions throughout the history of the church.

Martha, who served the meal that day, and Simon the Leper, who hosted the meal, also made a big difference. They set the stage for this memorable event. Many Jews came to Bethany and believed, in part, because they made it possible for Jesus to have a meal there.

John emphasizes the way the Lord used Lazarus. We read that many Jews went away from the Judaism of the chief priests and believed on Jesus because of him (v. 11). What did Lazarus have to do to make this happen? Not much, really. He got sick and died. He came forth out of the tomb when Jesus told him to. And now he was enjoying a delicious meal with the Savior, unashamed to follow openly the One who had given him new life. This meant that his life was in danger too now, but none of these accomplishments of his can be described as heroic.

Surely, you and I can be used by the Lord as well. We can devote ourselves to worship and adore the Lord, believing that God will use that to make a difference. We can serve willingly with simple tasks, believing that God will use those efforts to make a difference. And we can die to self and live to follow Jesus unashamed and unafraid. We too can make a difference because of the power of Christ to use even us in this way.

Conclusion: It is not likely that any of us possesses ointment worth \$95,000 that we can use in to worship the Lord and to advance His gospel.

But we do have a very valuable asset that is just as precious and can be used just as well. The word that describes the costliness of Mary's nard-oil in our passage (v. 3) is also used in 1 Peter 1:7 of something every true believer possesses.

It says, "That the trial of your faith, being much more *precious* than of gold that perisheth, though it be tried with fire, might be found unto praise and honour and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ."

Mary had costly ointment for the Lord. You and I have more -precious-than-gold faith to offer the Lord. In the ages to come, the difficult faithfulness we bring in service to our Savior shall not be forgotten, but like Mary's gift it too shall count for the glory, honor, and praise of our Lord at His appearing. Let's accept these challenges to believe and dedicate our lives to be faithful to Him.

"A man came—I think it was actually in Philadelphia—on one occasion to the great George Whitefield and asked if he might print his sermons. Whitefield gave this reply; he said, 'Well, I have no inherent objection, if you like, but you will never be able to put on the printed page the lightning and the thunder.' That is the distinction—the sermon, and the 'lightning and the thunder.' To Whitefield this was of very great importance, and it should be of very great importance to all preachers, as I hope to show. You can put the sermon into print, but not the lightning and the thunder. That comes into the act of preaching and cannot be conveyed by cold print. Indeed it almost baffles the descriptive powers of the best reporters."

—David Martin Lloyd-Jones,

Preachers and Preaching