

## Martha & Mary, part 2

Sermon Preached at DCC by Phil Kayser on 2021-05-09

In our Women of Faith series, I will normally only give one sermon per woman, but since we dealt with Martha and Mary together last week (looking at Luke 10), I want to take both of them together a second time - this time covering all of John 11 and the first eight verses of John 12. Both of these occasions were huge challenges to their faith. And I myself have been very encouraged by their testimony.

### Lessons from the first grief of Martha and Mary - the death of Lazarus (John 11:1-46)

And we will start with the lessons found in John 11. Let's read John 11, verses 1-3.

John 11:1 Now a certain man was sick, Lazarus of Bethany, the town of Mary and her sister Martha. 2 It was that Mary who anointed the Lord with fragrant oil and wiped His feet with her hair, whose brother Lazarus was sick. 3 Therefore the sisters sent to Him, saying, "Lord, behold, he whom You love is sick."

### Bad things happen to even those well-loved by Jesus (vv. 1-3)

We already discovered last week that Jesus loved Martha, Mary, and Lazarus dearly. Yet Lazarus got sick. This confuses some people. They think that sickness could never come from God's own hand, so any sickness is evidence to them of a lack of faith, or of sin in our lives, Satan's attacks, and the absence of God's favor upon us. They think, "If God loved me, He wouldn't let me get sick. Or if God loved me, He wouldn't let my relative die." What makes matters worse is that there are some hyper-charismatics who will prey upon such fears and use sickness as a means of their own enrichment and control over people.

Here's the logic they try to use. They correctly state that healing is in the atonement. I believe that is correct. But they incorrectly insist that if healing is in the atonement, then it is always God's will for you to be healed just like it is always God's will for you to put off sin. For them, failure to be healed shows lack of faith or else sin in your life. Others might not go so far as to say that, but will insist that only Satan brings disease and death and it is always God's will for us to have the opposite. But Isaiah and Revelation are clear that death will happen even after Satan and demons are all bound in the pit - and that it will happen to even the most godly people in future history. Hebrews tells us that everyone has an appointment with death.

Second, Scripture repeatedly says that God Himself brings sicknesses into our lives for our good. For example, in Exodus 4:11 God himself asks the rhetorical question "Who gave man his mouth? Who makes him deaf or dumb? Who gives him sight or makes him blind? Is it not I, the Lord?" He equally attributes sight and blindness to Himself. He does not attribute deafness or blindness to Satan as if God is out of control. In 2 Kings 15:5 we read the well-known story of the Lord striking King Azariah with a skin disease from which he suffered till the day he died. And in Luke, the angel of the Lord came directly from God's presence to strike Zechariah with an affliction (inability to speak) because he doubted God's word

regarding the birth of John the Baptist (Luke 1:19–20). But then there are other examples (like the man born blind) where Jesus said that he wasn't blind on account of any sin, but was blind purely for the glory of God. Now, it is true that Satan can be used as a tool if God wants to use him as a tool, but God Himself can bring sickness without any other means - and has often done so.

Third, though Romans 8:23 affirms that healing of our bodies is in the atonement, it clearly ties the redemption of our body to the time of our resurrection. That means that any healings we receive in this life are downpayments and foretastes of the ultimate healing. And God is not obligated to heal.

And we will see shortly that lack of healing is no indication that God does not love us. Jesus loved Lazarus dearly, but He allowed him to get sick and eventually to die. All of us (even those who have the most faith and holiness) will likewise eventually die. To fail to see this leaves people open to the manipulations of unethical millionaire charismatic healers who use this subject to torment souls with false guilt. I think this is such an important lesson. Bad things can indeed happen to those whom God loves and it is no indication that they are not loved.

### **They simply & humbly laid their need at Christ's feet (v. 3)**

But at the same time, Martha and Mary did bring this sickness to Christ's attention. And I love the humble way they did so. This too is a rebuke to some of the TV evangelists who shout at God and command God to heal people. We dare not command God to do anything. In verse 3 we see that Martha and Mary humbly laid their need before the Lord. J. C. Ryle says,

They did not ask Him to come at once, or to work a miracle, and command the disease to depart. They only said, "Lord, he whom Thou lovest is sick," and left the matter there, in the full belief that He would do what was best.<sup>1</sup>

When you have faith that Jesus is your Friend and that He always has your best interests in mind, your prayers take on a different tone. Your prayers will not become demanding or petulant. Your prayers will recognize Him as the loving Lord, and we at His good pleasure.

### **God can be glorified through our needs and losses (v. 4)**

The next lesson that I see is that God can be glorified through our needs and losses. We don't like to think about that, but He can be. Verse 4 says,

John 11:4 When Jesus heard that, He said, "This sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God, that the Son of God may be glorified through it."

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<sup>1</sup> J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on John*, vol. 2 (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1878), 229.

Commentators point out that this was Christ's reply to the messenger who had been sent from Martha and Mary, so these words were not just intended for His disciples to hear, but for Martha and Mary to have their faith challenged. The messenger would have brought these words back to the sisters before Lazarus died. And what words would they hear? "This sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God, that the Son of God may be glorified through it." And we will see that this probably factored strongly into Martha's words in verse 22 - where she knows that if Christ wants to, it's still not too late for Lazarus - which to me is astounding faith. Jesus said enough to stir up hope, but not enough for them to know how this would happen - especially when death did indeed grab hold of Lazarus for a time. And this is the way God often works with us. God gives us enough in the Scripture to produce faith and hope, but not enough to answer all of our questions or even to remove all of our pain. After hearing these words, I'm sure Martha and Mary were very confused at the death of Lazarus. Wait a minute. Didn't Jesus say this sickness is not unto death? They may have thought that they had misunderstood Him.

But Christ's reference to both He and His Father being glorified through this sickness is a truth that we also need to lay hold of. There is nothing in life that cannot glorify God when we respond to those things in a Christ-centered way. We should be looking for how to glorify God in even our pains and sicknesses.

### Jesus loves different kinds of people (v. 5)

Verse 5 is another mention of Christ's love:

John 11:5 Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus.

We talked about the different personalities last week and that Christ did not have favorites among them. Some books represent Mary as if she was His pet and His favorite, but none of the passages say that, and this one specifically singles out Martha by name. Jesus loves all kinds of different personalities. He doesn't just love the Marys in our midst; He loves the Marthas. And I take great comfort from that.

### Delays and death do not mean God does not love us (v. 6-14)

So, the fact that they were loved is quite clear. What is not so clear during the dark providences in our lives is how God's love could possibly relate to the crushing sorrows that we face. Verses 6-14 give us confidence that bad things that happen to us are not an indication of God's lack of love.

### Christ's love affirmed as the reason for the delay and allowing the death (v. 6)

On the contrary, verses 5-6 affirm that love was the first of several reasons why Jesus delayed His coming until it appeared to be too late; until Lazarus had died. I want you to notice the "So" that connects verses 5 and 6.

John 11:5 Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. 6 So, when He heard that he was sick, He stayed two more days in the place where He was.

The “So” in verse 6 is the Greek word, οὖν, which means “Therefore.” The NIV translation totally misses an important point here because they don’t translate this literally. You really need to have literal translations in your hands. The NIV translates it, “*Yet* when He heard that Lazarus was sick . . .” as if it was despite His love. No, it wasn’t despite His love, but *because* of His love that He stayed an extra two days. It was precisely His love that made Him wait.

Fellow Christians, if you ever doubt God’s love and concern when you go through difficulties; if you are ever tempted to think that He is indifferent to your plight simply because He is delaying His answer to your prayers, then take to heart this verse. Take to heart 1 Peter 5:7 which says of God “He cares for you”, and it says that in the midst of fiery persecution that God allowed them to go through. Some of those saints might have wondered how God could love them if God allowed them to go through so much persecution. But by faith we can know that He does. A child with a sickness might not understand fully why the parents allowed a painful surgery, but he can still trust that the parents do love him. In the same way, it was Christ’s great love that dictated the delay. And the same is true of the delayed answers to our prayers.

### This was “for your sakes” (v. 14-15a)

A second reason for God’s delays is that they are always for our spiritual benefit. Look at verses 14-15

John 11:14 Then Jesus said to them plainly, “Lazarus is dead. 15 And I am glad for your sakes that I was not there, that you may believe. Nevertheless let us go to him.

Verse 15 says that Jesus was glad for this delay because it was *for their sakes*. It was for their benefit. And again, who wouldn’t want to wait if you knew that you would be receiving far more benefit by receiving the answer in one year rather than right now? If you had a choice of \$1000 in your pocket right now or \$100,000 in your pocket in one year, wouldn’t you take the latter? Some people wouldn’t. They are so immature and present oriented that all they care about is what they have in their pocket now. But mature Christians are willing to wait if they know it is for their best spiritual interests. We call this deferred gratification.

### This was to increase their faith (v. 15b)

But verse 15 gives another reason for this delay - to increase their faith. Jesus said, “And I am glad for your sakes that I was not there, *that you may believe.*” This whole event was designed to strengthen their faith in Jesus and to glorify Jesus throughout history. To this day we delight in the doctrine of Jesus illustrated in these chapters – that He is the Resurrection and the Life. But we would not have had this glorious chapter without the delay and the pain and sorrow it created. If we always got everything we asked the moment we asked for it, there would be no room for faith to grow. But when God delays, our faith is stretched and exercised and made strong. And who among us does not want to grow in faith? We do! Therefore we should welcome those times when God says “Wait.” God is for us, and He is pleased by a life of faith far more than by a life of comfort. In Lamentations it says, “The LORD is good to those who wait for Him.”

### This was to force them to live by the light already given (vv. 9-10)

So those are three obvious reasons on the surface. But let's back up a bit to verses 9-10 to see yet another reason why God allowed the sickness, the delayed answer to prayer, and even the death of Lazarus.

John 11:9 Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours in the day? If anyone walks in the day, he does not stumble, because he sees the light of this world. 10 But if one walks in the night, he stumbles, because the light is not in him."

This might seem unrelated to the subject matter that Jesus is addressing, but it is directly related. Jesus wanted to force Martha, Mary, and his disciples to live by the light that had already been given to them. He starts with an illustration of limited sunlight, and in verse 10 applies it to inward light. So obviously this is a metaphor of what the Spirit is doing internally. What He is saying is that no one has light all the time. There are only twelve hours of daylight in which to walk in, and nobody complains about that, do they? We all know that there are times when we can't see well, but we are thankful for the twelve hours of daylight that we do have, and we take full advantage of those twelve hours of daylight.

In the spiritual realm, the same should be true. Our responsibility is to walk within the light that God has given rather than to freeze up during the daylight hours simply because we have stumbled at night. And what a powerful illustration this is. So many Christians refuse to step out in obedience to the Lord, simply because there are some things in the future that are dark; that they don't have a clue on. And they are scared about those future periods that they are dark on. These disciples didn't know whether they would end up being killed. And Martha and Mary didn't know what the next two days would hold. No one fully knows the future. Yet despite that, we must obey God's call in the present. We must submit to Him in faith.

### This was to help them gain an eternal perspective on the painful events of this life (vv. 11-14)

Verse 11 gives another reason for this delay. And that is to help us realize that our critical events are not that serious when looked at from an eternal perspective. We might think: "What could be more critical than a life and death issue?" But in verse 11 Jesus says, "Our friend Lazarus sleeps, but I go that I may wake him up" - yet another promise that He would reverse what Lazarus had. He is not denying that He is dead. Look at verses 12-14. Then His disciples said, "Lord, if he sleeps he will get well." That's an excuse that springs from fear of the Pharisees. Their attitude is, "Good. Let's not go." Verses 13-14:

However, Jesus spoke of his death, but they thought that He was speaking about taking a rest in sleep. Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead."

So why didn't He say so in the first place? I believe it is because He was seeking to bring death into a realistic perspective. For the Christian, death is simply like falling asleep to this world and waking to another world. It's no more frightening than sleep. Martha wanted them there lest Lazarus die. The disciples want to stay away lest they die. They have an anxiety over death. But Jesus is telling them to lay hold of their responsibilities before

death comes, and they need not fear anything - not even death. What was it that Ron Dotzler said when people argued that he was living in a dangerous part of town? He said that the safest place to be is in the center of God's will, and the most dangerous place to be is out of His will – even if you are in safe West Omaha.

## Differences coming out again between how Martha and Mary handle pain (vv. 17-21)

We've dealt plenty with the different personalities between Martha and Mary. Here you can see those differences coming out during a time of sorrow. Verses 17-21.

John 11:17 So when Jesus came, He found that he had already been in the tomb four days. 18 Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, about two miles away. 19 And many of the Jews had joined the women around Martha and Mary, to comfort them concerning their brother.

Notice that Jesus wasn't the only one who loved these two women. Many Jews comforted them. And comfort during times of loss is an important part of our Christianity. None of us should shy away from bringing comfort to those who sorrow. Yes, it can be awkward, but it is needed. Verse 20:

John 11:20 Now Martha, as soon as she heard that Jesus was coming, went and met Him, but Mary was sitting in the house. 21 Now Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died.

Martha is ever the initiator; the take-charge-person who jumps into action. She goes out to meet Jesus while Mary stays behind mourning. And Martha is rather blunt here, in effect saying that if Jesus had come when they asked Him to come, none of this would have happened. It's a veiled rebuke.

She said, "If you had been here." We have lots of "if only" feelings, don't we? We have regrets about ourselves and wishes about what others had done. If you had been here, but now it is too late. It is so easy to think that God has met His match with our particular problem. Sarah thought that God had met His match with her infertility. We may have given up on trying to promote righteousness in our culture because the problem seems too big. But we need to be convinced that no problem is too big for God to handle. He continues to be a God of miracles.

It is easy for us to give up on prayer just because God does not answer right away. 2 Kings 6:33 shows the king of Samaria praying to God in sackcloth and ashes because they were being besieged and the food had run out. Finally in disgust the king takes his anger out on Elijah and says, "Surely this calamity is from the LORD; why should I wait for the LORD any longer." He gave up praying when God didn't instantly respond. Elijah's response was that tomorrow the food would be plentiful in the streets, and true to the promise, even though it looked impossible, there was food in abundance. So don't limit God's power, willingness, or in any way look to a deficiency in God when our prayers are delayed. Those are all inappropriate responses.

Anyway, blunt as Martha was, she shows remarkable faith in verses 22-27:

## Martha's remarkable statements of faith (vv. 22-27)

22 But even now I know that whatever You ask of God, God will give You."

She had seen Jesus raise people from the dead. So far Jesus had raised the widow of Nain's son (Luke 7) and Jairus' daughter (Luke 8). But he had also commanded His disciples to raise the dead in Matthew 10:8 - and presumably they had done so. So Martha is convinced that Jesus can do it. Will He? She is not sure, though Christ's message through the messengers should have given her that confidence. And she may have thought that He would indeed do so. But it is true that His promises had been somewhat cryptic. Anyway, Jesus tries to draw out her faith in these verses.

John 11:23 Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again."

John 11:24 Martha said to Him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day."

John 11:25 Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. 26 And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die. Do you believe this?"

John 11:27 She said to Him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that You are the Christ, the Son of God, who is to come into the world."

So here was a woman who had remarkable faith. Ryle says,

Our English word, "I believe," hardly gives the full sense of the Greek. It would be literally, "I have believed, and do believe." This is my faith, and has been for a long time.<sup>2</sup>

So Martha gives a clearer testimony of Christ's Person and Work than even Peter. She believes Christ could have healed Lazarus. She believes that Christ can still raise him from the dead if He wants to. She believes in a future resurrection. She believes that He fulfills all the prophecies of the Messiah being both Man and God. But her desire to not be presumptuous keeps her from laying claim to His earlier promises. And it used to be the same fear of offending God or being presumptuous that made it hard for me to keep praying to God. I didn't want to pester God. That all changed when people convinced me that taking God at His Word honors Him, and failing to claim His promises dishonors Him. Praying according to God's will does not mean guessing His decretive will (which will always be done anyway). Praying according to His will is claiming His revealed will in the Bible. Martha could have done that without fear.

## Martha's sensitivity ("secretly called Mary her sister" v. 28)

But before we look more at her faith, let's look at the fact that Martha can be sensitive and caring. This is often missed. Verse 28 says,

John 11:28 And when she had said these things, she went her way and secretly called Mary her sister, saying, "The Teacher has come and is calling for you."

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<sup>2</sup> J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on John, vol. 2* (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1878), 265.

Mary was a deeply emotional person and it appears that she was overwhelmed enough that she wanted to be by herself in the house. Though Martha has given Mary some space to mourn, she knows that it is time for Mary to come out and talk. Mary would sympathize with people who feel like being alone, but she would not agree with bailing on responsibilities. Nor would Martha. Though still grieving, Mary goes out to meet Jesus. And there are times when we have to push people out of their retreat and out of their puddle of tears and help them to start meeting with others. But I get the idea of sensitivity especially from the phrase, “she went her way and secretly called Mary her sister...” She didn’t want to say what she was going to say in front of a crowd. She was being sensitive in the way she pushed Mary. Context.

### Mary’s prompt response to Jesus (v. 29)

Mary promptly responds. Verse 29:

29 As soon as she heard that, she arose quickly and came to Him.

She does not allow her grief to keep her from Jesus. I have seen Christians (and even pastors) do the opposite. They have become angry at God over a loss and don’t want to come into His presence. They mope for years. If your sorrows alienate you from Jesus rather than drawing you to Jesus, aside from having sinful attitudes, you also either have a faulty view of Christ’s heart or a faulty view of where your solace should come from. He should be the first one that you come to so that you can cast your cares upon Him.

### Mary’s anguish poured out before her Master (vv. 33-33) and Christ’s heart for her (vv. 33-35)

And in the next point she does exactly that. I’ll skip ahead to verses 33-35.

John 11:33 Therefore, when Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her weeping, He groaned in the spirit and was troubled. 34 And He said, “Where have you laid him?” They said to Him, “Lord, come and see.” 35 Jesus wept. 36 Then the Jews said, “See how He loved him!”

I’m always amazed by how touched Jesus was by the pain of others as well as by any other negative effects of the fall upon others. And Hebrews 4:15 says that Jesus continues to sympathize with us in our weaknesses.

So that is one lesson. Here are three further lessons we can learn from this interchange.

First, it is not sinful to sorrow. Jesus had deep sorrow. He was often moved by His deep emotions - *splanknizo* is the Greek word. In the past thirty years I have run across several people who act as if sorrow is sinful and they do not know how to grieve. Their stoicism is certainly not imitating Jesus.

Second, it is not manliness to stuff your tears - at least not the kind of manliness that the Scripture talks about. That idea that men must stuff their tears flows out of the rugged individualism of the wild west. But Jesus was a manly man - a man who could weep with those who weep - something Paul commands all of us to do in Romans 12:15.



Third, Jesus shows us how to enter into the pain of others without being overwhelmed by those pains; how to have a tender heart without allowing emotions to dictate our actions.

### Funerals as great opportunities for witness (v. 36)

And His immediate action in this case was to seek to be a good witness in the situation. Is that *your* first response when you are in a painful situation? He used the funeral to testify to the Gospel. And funerals are great opportunities for that. Pagans who attend the funeral can see your grief (that you are a real human being experiencing real pain), but they can also see your faith and joy and confidence in the midst of that grief - a confidence and joy that is missing in pagan funerals. Verse 36:

36 Then the Jews said, "See how He loved him!" 37 And some of them said, "Could not this Man, who opened the eyes of the blind, also have kept this man from dying?"

Here was a huge crowd of witnesses that needed to be challenged that Jesus was the Lord of even death. But even had there been no resurrection, this still could have been a great opportunity for witness. Out in Ethiopia, funerals were often the largest opportunities of evangelistic outreach since all the neighbors were socially obligated to come to every funeral. And when they would come to Christian funerals and see the joy and celebration that the Christians had, it blew them away. At the pagan funerals, the family wailed without hope; they cut themselves with knives and were in despair. Pagan funerals were horrible events to witness since people did not have hope for eternity. And when they saw that the Christians did not fear death, and they witnessed joy at the reality of heaven, and the confidence that they would go to heaven, many of those who came believed.

### Martha always quick to correct (vv. 38-39)

In verse 39 Martha's take charge personality comes in.

John 11:38 Then Jesus, again groaning in Himself, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone lay against it. 39 Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of him who was dead, said to Him, "Lord, by this time there is a stench, for he has been dead four days."

She is not the type of person to let Jesus find out for Himself. And if you are a Martha, it is probably good to try to temper your desires to fix others and to rescue others from what you think are bad decisions.

### Jesus's gracious response (v. 40)

But in verse 40 we have Christ's gracious response - and really, the whole purpose of this exercise, which was to strengthen Martha's faith:

John 11:40 Jesus said to her, "Did I not say to you that if you would believe you would see the glory of God?"

He's indicating that Martha has some unbelief mixed in with her remarkable faith. And this is so true of all of us. We can have incredibly strong faith to trust Jesus in certain areas of our life and totally miss the boat in other areas. Ryle comments,

How apt our faith is to break down in time of trial! How easy it is to talk of faith in the days of health and prosperity, and how hard to practice it in the days of darkness, when neither sun, moon, nor stars appear! Let us lay to heart what our Lord says in this place. Let us pray for such stores of inward faith, that when our turn comes to suffer, we may suffer patiently and believe all is well. The Christian who has ceased to say, "I must see, and then I will believe," and has learned to say, "I believe, and by and by I shall see," has reached a high degree in the school of Christ.<sup>3</sup>

## Jesus resurrection of Lazarus (vv. 41-44)

And since this is a biographical sermon on the women, I won't spend a lot of time on the resurrection, though you can well imagine the incredible joy this would have brought to the sisters. Verses 41-44

41 Then they took away the stone from the place where the dead man was lying. And Jesus lifted up His eyes and said, "Father, I thank You that You have heard Me. 42 And I know that You always hear Me, but because of the people who are standing by I said this, that they may believe that You sent Me." 43 Now when He had said these things, He cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come forth!" 44 And he who had died came out bound hand and foot with graveclothes, and his face was wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Loose him, and let him go."

## The two responses to this miracle

This was an astounding miracle that deserves a sermon on all in its own. But I just want to comment on the two reactions.

### Belief (v. 45)

The first reaction to this miracle we might expect: belief. Verse 45 says,

John 11:45 Then many of the Jews who had come to Mary, and had seen the things Jesus did, believed in Him.

What a gratifying glorious response. This is what we hope will happen through our witness.

### Opposition (vv. 46-57; 12:10)

But given total depravity, the second reaction should not be surprising. The second reaction is that many of Christ's enemies stayed enemies. They too had seen the miracle - but it didn't change their hearts. They continue to oppose Christ, try to discredit Him, and talk together on how to kill Him. They know He has done this miracle, but they hate Him for it. And chapter 12:10 shows that they even felt it necessary to plot to kill Lazarus since a living Lazarus was such a powerful testimony to the Person and Work of Christ. They can't deny the resurrection - they can only attempt to get it out of the public eye. This is why Scripture says that unbelief is not because of lack of evidence. The world is filled with

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<sup>3</sup> J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on John, vol. 2* (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1878), 279.

evidence to the true God and His attributes. Instead, unbelief is willful. Which again, illustrates that the faith of Martha and Mary is a tribute to grace and to grace alone.

## Lessons from the second grief anticipated - the death of Jesus (12:1-8)

But I will end with the remarkable testimony of Mary in John 12:1-8. Let's read that.

John 12:1 Then, six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, where Lazarus was who had been dead, whom He had raised from the dead. 2 There they made Him a supper; and Martha served, but Lazarus was one of those who sat at the table with Him. 3 Then Mary took a pound of very costly oil of spikenard, anointed the feet of Jesus, and wiped His feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the oil. 4 But one of His disciples, Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, who would betray Him, said, 5 "Why was this fragrant oil not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?" 6 This he said, not that he cared for the poor, but because he was a thief, and had the money box; and he used to take what was put in it. 7 But Jesus said, "Let her alone; she has kept this for the day of My burial. 8 For the poor you have with you always, but Me you do not have always."

It is easy to get so focused on the bad attitudes of the disciples, that we miss the significance of Mary's actions. And it is so easy to try to reconcile the timing of verse 1 with the timing of the anointing in Matthew 26 and Mark 14 that we miss the brilliance of Mary's faith. But I will spend a minute or two on whether this is the same anointing as happened in Matthew 26. Some scholars don't think so; they see two anointings - this one six days before and the one in the synoptics two days before Passover. Others (like me) simply see Christ's coming to Bethany six days earlier with four days of activity left out of the John account and John just highlighting the most significant event of those four days. I don't feel the need to settle that debate this morning, but I do hold that there were four days of activity between verses 1 and 2. And if you hold that, it perfectly meshes with Matthew 26.

But let me spend some time highlighting the fact that Mary had a laser-like faith in Christ's words. Chapter 11 has hugely strengthened her faith. At this point her faith is stronger than that of the apostles. Christ had repeatedly told His apostles that He was going to be scourged, crucified, die, and be raised from the dead on the third day. He had started speaking of His coming death the Fall before (in John 7 and 9). They should not have been surprised, yet they had a hard time believing that he would die, and Peter even sought to rebuke Jesus for talking about His death. Mary had a simple faith that Jesus would do exactly as He said.

In verse 7 Jesus made this statement about the fragrant and expensive oil: "Let her alone; she has kept this for the day of My burial." The Greek word for "kept" is τηρέω, and means to keep watch over, guard, reserve, or preserve. It indicates a very deliberate holding on to this perfume for one purpose and one purpose only - Christ's burial. She had self-consciously reserved it for the day of His burial.

I will comment in a bit on why she poured it on Him *before* His burial, but right now I want to focus on Christ's words, "she has kept this for the day of My burial." That statement implies three things:

First, Mary had been saving this for some time for Jesus. Though her brother had died earlier, and though it was normal to use such costly oils for the dead, she had not poured it on Lazarus. She had kept this for Jesus. Nothing would deviate her from using it for Jesus. This was her love offering for Jesus. And it was indeed costly. The margin says that it cost about a year's salary for an ordinary working man.

Second, she kept it for Christ's burial. That implies that she believed that He *would* be buried - just as He said He would. This is a remarkable faith statement on her part. What other disciple had that kind of laser-like acceptance of Christ's prediction of dying and burial?

Third, she poured it on Jesus *before* the day of His burial. If she had been keeping it for the *day* of His burial, why did she not wait until He was dead? I believe John Phillips is absolutely correct when he says that this was now an act of faith that Jesus would arise from the dead as He promised just as surely as He would be buried. He had repeatedly promised the two together, and after the theology statement that Jesus had made with the resurrection of Lazarus, she had no doubt. In fact, it was probably the burial of Lazarus that made her realize that Jesus didn't need this fragrant oil at His burial. I love that commentator's statements so much, I will read him at length. He says,

...Jesus would not need the spikenard when he was buried after all.

So, she said to herself, I'll give it to him the next time he's here. It was a marvelous demonstration of her faith. She had kept that ointment for his burial, but she gave it to him a week before [and it is actually only two days before]—because she now believed in his resurrection. No wonder the house was filled with the fragrance!

Mary of Bethany seems to have been the only one who believed the truth of resurrection. You won't find her at the cross or at the tomb. Nor was it cowardice or despair that kept her away. You'll find Mary, the Lord's mother, at the cross. You'll find Mary Magdalene at the tomb. You'll find Mary the mother of James and Joses at the cross and at the tomb. But not Mary of Bethany. She had not the slightest need to be at either place. She was already standing on resurrection ground.

Every local church needs Marthas to get things done. Every church needs Marys to help others enter into the deep things of God. Every local church needs men like Lazarus, a witness (12:9–11) in a special sense.<sup>4</sup>

This makes Mary have one of the most remarkable testimonies of faith in the Gospels. Martha's and Peter's were the clearest testimonies before this, but this testimony is outstanding. Indeed (if you take Matthew 26 and Mark 14) as telling the same story (which I do), Jesus Himself speaks of it as a remarkable action of faith. He said,

Assuredly, I say to you, wherever this gospel is preached in the whole world, what this woman has done will also be told as a memorial to her." (Matt. 26:13)

This is why there is no weeping of the woman in Matthew 26 and Mark 14 or John 12 (all the same woman), but there *was* weeping of the sinful woman in Luke 7 - which was much earlier in Christ's ministry anyway. For Mary, there was nothing to weep about. She had

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<sup>4</sup> John Phillips, *Exploring the Gospel of John: An Expository Commentary, The John Phillips Commentary Series* (Kregel Publications; WORDsearch Corp., 2009), Jn 12:4–11.

faith that Christ would mount the cross as a conquering warrior, would rise from the dead as a conquering warrior, and had put her trust in Him. I happen to think that Martha had a similar faith - a faith that enabled them to carry on with duty despite the grief of knowing that Jesus would suffer. In verse 2 it says that “they” (which I take to be both Mary and Martha - *they*) “made Him a supper.” After the supper was prepared, Mary let Martha have the honors of serving - something near and dear to Martha’s heart. She loved serving.

But in verse 3 we have Mary’s language of love once again coming to the fore - extravagant devotion to the Lord. And that’s the next application that I would like to make. The cost of her extravagant gift of love was so great that it made everyone in the room stop what they were doing and look with disapproval at her, and then start commenting self-righteously that this was inappropriate. We must guard our hearts that we do not have similar disapproval of extravagant worship and love from the Mary’s in our midst. I’m a Martha. I’m a bit more reserved in my worship. But I value the Mary’s in our midst who bubble over with devotion to God. And I don’t want Christ rebuking me with his words, “Let her alone.” After you have seen a brother raised to newness of life like Lazarus was, it is hard to keep your enthusiasm down.

My next application is to the Mary’s in our midst. You may feel cut to the heart by people who misunderstand and criticize your love and extravagant worship, but keep your eyes fixed on Jesus. Ignore them. They are not the ones that you are doing it for anyway. Focus on Jesus, the One who loves to receive Martha’s service and loves to receive Mary’s extravagant devotion. Mary was criticized in Luke 10 for being lazy (a misunderstanding) and was criticized in John 12 for being wasteful (another misunderstanding). Both times Jesus defended her. What is it about human nature that makes us get critical so easily? I don’t know. But my advice to every Mary is to serve Christ, not the approval of man.

My last application comes from John 11:1, where Bethany is described as “the town of Mary and her sister Martha,” which some commentators take as indicating that they were notable figures in the town. When this is coupled with the evidence of their great wealth from last week’s sermon, it shows that Martha and Mary could have commanded respect; they could have. Yet Mary is not too proud to wipe Christ’s feet with her hair in verse 3 - no doubt imitating the woman of disrepute in Luke 7 who did likewise. I can imagine Mary heard of what the prostitute did and said to herself - “I feel the same way. I am utterly undeserving of Christ’s love - and it makes me want to love Him all the more. It humbles me, yet exalts me.” It was a very visible gesture of both her love for Christ, but also His Lordship over her that she gladly submitted to. Both Martha and Mary were not too proud to serve and to see others as better than themselves. As such, they both stand as remarkable examples that all of us can imitate. May we do so with joy. Amen.