

The Gospel of John, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 17: Mary's Anointing and the Triumphal Entry

John 12:1-50

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

John 12 stands at the hinge between Jesus' public ministry and the cross, and it gathers several profound truths. Doctrinally, it presents the meaning of Jesus' coming death through the image of the grain of wheat (life through death, fruit through falling into the ground), it shows Jesus as the humble King prophesied by Zechariah, it declares the cross as the great drawing power of Christ ("lifted up... will draw all people"), and it confronts the mystery of persistent unbelief, including those who believed but would not confess Christ because they loved human approval. The heaviest doctrinal block belongs at Question 9, with significant weight at Questions 5 and 8.

At the same time, the chapter is rich with formation. Mary's extravagant anointing models lavish devotion and rebukes our calculating, respectable holding back. The grain of wheat calls every follower to the path of dying to self. Jesus' troubled-yet-resolved soul models facing hard callings. The teacher should let the chapter both clarify the meaning of the cross and call the students to wholehearted, self-denying devotion.

So aim at both: a clear grasp of the cross as the path of life and the drawing power of Christ, and a heart that pours out lavish devotion and follows Jesus in dying to self. The disciple we are forming gives extravagantly and follows the grain of wheat into fruitful death and life.

Question 1

Student Question:

Mary anointed Jesus with costly perfume, and He said she did it "for the day of my burial" (vv. 3-7). What does Mary's act teach us about true worship and devotion to Christ?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Mary's act is breathtaking in its extravagance: a pound of pure nard, worth about three hundred denarii (nearly a year's wages), poured out on Jesus and wiped with her hair (vv. 3, 5). Jesus interprets it: "She has kept it for the day of my burial" (v. 7). Mary's devotion was lavish, costly, and perceptive.

Draw out what this teaches about worship. True worship is not calculated or stingy; it pours out what is precious on Christ because He is worthy. Mary did not measure or hold back; she gave her best. Worship that costs nothing and risks nothing falls short of the devotion Christ deserves.

Note Mary's insight. While others missed it, Mary seemed to sense that Jesus was heading toward death, and she lavished her love on Him now, while she could. Her devotion was tender and timely. Real love for Christ pays attention to who He is and what He is doing, and responds wholeheartedly.

Apply it. Help students consider what lavish, costly devotion to Christ might look like in their own lives, in giving, in time, in surrender, in worship. The world, and Judas, will call it waste; Jesus calls it beautiful (Mark 14:6). Ask students where they sense Christ inviting them to a more extravagant devotion.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- True worship as lavish, costly devotion poured out on the worthy Christ (John 12:3, 7).
- Worship that holds nothing back versus calculated, stingy religion.
- Mary's perceptive love attentive to who Jesus is.
- Christ calling beautiful what the world calls waste (Mark 14:6).

Discussion Prompts

- What does Mary's act teach about true worship and devotion?
- Where might Christ be inviting you to more extravagant devotion?
- What in your devotion to Christ has cost you something?

Question 2

Student Question:

Judas masked his greed with concern for the poor (vv. 4–6), while Mary gave extravagantly. When you examine your own giving and devotion, where are you generous, and where do you hold back behind respectable-sounding excuses?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question sets Judas and Mary side by side. Judas objected to Mary's gift in the language of charity, "Why was this ointment not sold... and given to the poor?", but John exposes his true motive: "not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief" (vv. 5–6). Respectable-sounding words masked a grasping heart.

Help students see the danger of dressing up our holding back in noble language. We rarely admit to stinginess or self-protection; we explain it as prudence, responsibility, or even concern for others. Judas's excuse sounded spiritual. Our excuses for withholding devotion often sound reasonable too.

Invite honest self-examination. Where are students genuinely generous toward Christ, with their time, money, and love, and where do they hold back behind respectable excuses? The contrast

with Mary, who gave lavishly without calculating, exposes the difference between true devotion and self-protective religion.

Press for specifics. Ask each student to name one area where they hold back from Christ behind a respectable excuse, and what extravagant devotion might look like there instead. The aim is to move from calculated giving to the wholehearted pouring-out that Mary modeled, without the self-deception that marked Judas.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The danger of masking a grasping heart in noble-sounding language (John 12:5-6).
- The contrast between Mary's lavish devotion and Judas's self-protection.
- Honest self-examination of where we hold back from Christ.
- Moving from calculated giving to wholehearted devotion.

Discussion Prompts

- Where are you generous toward Christ, and where do you hold back?
- What respectable excuses mask your holding back?
- What would extravagant devotion look like in that area?

Question 3

Student Question:

Jesus entered Jerusalem on a donkey as the crowds hailed Him as King, fulfilling Zechariah's prophecy of a humble king (vv. 12-15). What kind of king is Jesus, and how does His humility overturn our expectations of power and greatness?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Jesus enters Jerusalem to shouts of "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel!" (v. 13), but He comes "sitting on a donkey's colt" (v. 15), fulfilling Zechariah 9:9, the prophecy of a humble king. The manner of His coming reveals the kind of King He is.

Draw out the overturning of expectations. A conquering king would ride a war horse; Jesus rides a donkey, the mount of peace. The crowd wanted a military deliverer to throw off Rome; Jesus comes as the gentle King who will conquer not by force but by laying down His life. His kingship redefines greatness.

Connect to the nature of His kingdom. As elsewhere in John, Jesus refuses the world's model of power. His kingdom is not established by armies or political might but by humility, service, and the cross (compare 18:36). The humble King overturns every worldly notion of how power works.

Apply it. Help students see how Jesus' humility rebukes our craving for status and our assumption that greatness means dominance. The King we follow washed feet and rode a donkey and died on a cross. Ask students how following such a King reshapes their own pursuit of greatness, and where they are tempted by the world's model of power instead.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Jesus as the humble King prophesied by Zechariah (John 12:15; Zechariah 9:9).
- His kingship overturning worldly notions of power and greatness.
- A kingdom established by humility and the cross, not force (John 18:36).
- Greatness redefined by service and self-giving.

Discussion Prompts

- What kind of king is Jesus, and how does His humility surprise us?
- How does His kingship overturn the world's idea of greatness?
- Where are you tempted by the world's model of power instead?

Question 4

Student Question:

The crowds wanted a king who matched their hopes, and many would soon turn on Him (vv. 12–13, compare vv. 37–43). Where have you wanted Jesus to be the kind of King who fits your agenda, and how do you respond when He does not?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question takes up the crowd's fickle expectations. They hailed Jesus as the King they wanted, but many would soon turn away because He was not the king they expected. John notes both the unbelief of the crowds (v. 37) and the way the people's hopes were tied to their own agenda.

Help students recognize the same tendency in themselves. We can want Jesus to be the kind of King who serves our agenda, who fixes our problems on our terms, who blesses our plans, who gives us the life we have designed. When He does not act as we expected, we can grow disappointed, distant, or resentful.

Draw out the danger. A Jesus shaped to fit our agenda is not the real Jesus; it is an idol of our own making. When the real Christ refuses to play the role we assigned Him, the crisis reveals whether we wanted Him or only what we hoped He would do for us.

Press for honest reflection. Ask students where they have wanted Jesus to be a King who fits their agenda, and how they respond when He does not. The mature response is not to abandon Him but to surrender our agenda to His, trusting that His kingship, though different from our

expectations, is wiser and better. Ask what surrendering a particular expectation to Him would look like.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The temptation to want a Jesus who serves our agenda.
- A Christ shaped to our expectations as an idol of our making.
- Disappointment with God revealing what we truly wanted.
- Surrendering our agenda to Christ's wiser kingship.

Discussion Prompts

- Where have you wanted Jesus to fit your agenda?
- How do you respond when He does not act as you expected?
- What expectation might you need to surrender to His kingship?

Question 5

Student Question:

Jesus said, "unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit" (v. 24). What does this teach about how Jesus would bring life through His death, and about the path of fruitfulness for His followers?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Jesus unlocks the meaning of His death with an image from nature: "unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit" (v. 24). The principle is life through death, fruit through falling into the ground.

Apply it first to Jesus. His death is not defeat but the very means of fruitfulness. Like a seed buried in the ground, He would die, and through His death bring forth a great harvest of redeemed people. Had He refused the cross, He would have "remained alone"; by dying, He bears much fruit. The cross is the seed of the church.

Then apply it to His followers, as Jesus immediately does. The same principle governs the disciple's life: fruitfulness comes through dying to self. The way up is down; the way to life is through death. This is the deep pattern of the kingdom, utterly contrary to the world's instinct for self-preservation and self-promotion.

Help students grasp the hope in it. Dying to self is not mere loss; it is the path to fruit. The seed that refuses to fall stays alone and barren; the seed that falls multiplies. Ask students where they sense the call to die to self, and help them see it not as deprivation but as the doorway to a fruitful life.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The grain of wheat: life through death, fruit through falling (John 12:24).
- The cross as the fruitful seed of redemption.
- Fruitfulness for the disciple coming through dying to self.
- The kingdom pattern reversing the world's self-preservation.

Discussion Prompts

- How does the grain of wheat explain Jesus' death?
- What is the path of fruitfulness for His followers?
- Where do you sense the call to die to self for the sake of fruit?

Question 6

Student Question:

Jesus said, "Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life" (v. 25). What would it look like this week to loosen your grip on your own life in order to truly find it in Christ?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question takes up Jesus' paradox: "Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life" (v. 25). Clinging to our life loses it; loosening our grip, even to the point of "hating" it in comparison to Christ, keeps it forever.

Clarify the language. To "hate" one's life does not mean self-contempt or a death wish; it means refusing to make self-preservation and self-fulfillment the highest goal. It means holding our life loosely, willing to surrender our own agenda, comfort, and control for the sake of Christ.

Paradoxically, this is the way to truly find life.

Help students see the everyday shape of this. Loosening our grip looks like surrendering control of outcomes, choosing service over self-advancement, forgiving rather than nursing grievances, giving generously rather than hoarding, putting Christ and others before our own preferences. Each is a small dying that leads to life.

Press for specifics. Ask each student where they are gripping their life too tightly, control, comfort, reputation, plans, and what loosening that grip would look like this week. The promise is that what we release to Christ we do not lose; we find it again, kept for eternal life. Help them take one concrete step of open-handed surrender.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Finding life by loosening our grip on it (John 12:25).
- "Hating" one's life as refusing self-preservation as the highest goal.
- Daily dying to self as the path to true life (Matthew 16:24–26).
- Open-handed surrender as gain, not loss.

Discussion Prompts

- Where are you gripping your life too tightly?
- What would loosening that grip look like this week?
- How is releasing something to Christ actually the way to keep it?

Question 7

Student Question:

With the cross in view Jesus said, “Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say? ‘Father, save me from this hour’? But for this purpose I have come to this hour” (v. 27). What does Jesus’ troubled soul, joined with His resolve, teach us about facing our own hard callings?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

As the cross draws near, Jesus reveals His inner struggle and His resolve: “Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say? ‘Father, save me from this hour’? But for this purpose I have come to this hour” (v. 27). He is genuinely troubled, and genuinely resolved.

Draw out the honesty of His troubled soul. Jesus does not approach the cross with cold detachment; His soul is troubled. This is the same Lord who would sweat in Gethsemane. He felt the full weight of what He was about to face. This tells us that distress in the face of a hard calling is not a failure of faith.

Then draw out His resolve. Alongside the trouble stands an unwavering commitment: “for this purpose I have come to this hour.” Jesus does not let His genuine distress turn Him from the Father’s will. He feels the cost fully and obeys fully. The two coexist: real anguish and real obedience.

Apply it to our own hard callings. Many believers think that if they are truly faithful, they should not feel distress about obeying God. Jesus shows otherwise. We can be deeply troubled and still resolved to do God’s will. Ask students what hard calling they face, and help them see that they may feel the weight fully and still, like Jesus, say, “for this purpose,” choosing obedience through the trouble.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Jesus’ genuine distress in the face of the cross (John 12:27).
- Distress in a hard calling not a failure of faith.
- Real anguish and real obedience coexisting in Christ.
- Choosing God’s will through, not around, the trouble.

Discussion Prompts

- What does Jesus’ troubled-yet-resolved soul teach you?

- What hard calling are you facing right now?
- How can you feel the weight fully and still choose obedience?

Question 8

Student Question:

Jesus said, “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself,” speaking of His death (vv. 32–33). How does the cross, rather than worldly power, become the great drawing power of Christ, and how have you felt its pull in your own life?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Jesus declares, “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself,” which John explains “to show by what kind of death he was going to die” (vv. 32–33). The “lifting up” is the cross, and the cross, paradoxically, is the great drawing power of Christ.

Draw out the paradox. We would expect Jesus to draw people by displays of power, by triumph, by impressive signs. Instead He says He will draw them by being lifted up to die. The cross, the place of apparent defeat and shame, becomes the magnet that draws the world. The crucified Christ is the great attraction of the gospel.

Explain why. At the cross we see the love of God most fully, the lengths to which He went to save us, the sin-bearing sacrifice that reconciles us to God. Nothing draws the human heart like crucified love. The cross both saves and woos; it is the power and the appeal of God (1 Corinthians 1:18, 23–24).

Note the scope, “all people,” without distortion. This does not teach that every individual will be saved, but that the drawing power of the cross reaches people of every kind, every nation, class, and background, gathering a worldwide harvest. Apply it personally: ask students how they have felt the pull of the cross in their own lives, and how the crucified Christ, not worldly power, remains the true drawing power of the gospel.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The cross as the great drawing power of Christ (John 12:32).
- Crucified love as what most powerfully draws the human heart.
- The cross as both the power and the appeal of God (1 Corinthians 1:18, 23–24).
- The worldwide scope of the drawing, people of every kind.

Discussion Prompts

- How does the cross, rather than worldly power, draw people to Christ?
- Why does crucified love draw the human heart so powerfully?
- How have you felt the pull of the cross in your own life?

Question 9

Student Question:

After all His signs, “they still did not believe in him” (v. 37), and John explains this by Isaiah’s prophecy, while noting that even many authorities believed but would not confess Him “for they loved the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God” (vv. 42–43). What does this teach about why people reject or hide their faith in Christ, and how does loving human approval keep people from openly following Him?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the heaviest doctrinal block of the lesson, confronting the mystery of persistent unbelief. Despite all of Jesus’ signs, “they still did not believe in him” (v. 37), which John explains by Isaiah’s prophecy about hardened hearts (vv. 38–41). Then comes a piercing observation: “Nevertheless, many even of the authorities believed in him, but for fear of the Pharisees they did not confess it, so that they would not be put out of the synagogue; for they loved the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God” (vv. 42–43).

Address the unbelief after the signs. John shows that the problem was never insufficient evidence. The signs were abundant and clear. The issue was the heart. Isaiah had foreseen that many would see and still not believe, their eyes blinded and hearts hardened, not because God arbitrarily prevented them, but as the judicial result of their persistent refusal to receive the truth. People who repeatedly reject the light eventually lose the capacity to see it. This is a sober warning, not a denial of human responsibility.

Focus the main weight on verses 42–43, which expose a specific and very common barrier: the love of human approval. Here were authorities who actually believed in Jesus, yet would not confess Him, because they feared exclusion and “loved the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God.” Their belief, unconfessed and unwilling to count the cost, was not the saving, confessing faith the gospel calls for (compare Romans 10:9–10; Matthew 10:32–33). A faith that hides to protect human approval is not yet a faith that saves.

Draw out the doctrine of the heart’s idols. The love of human glory is one of the great obstacles to openly following Christ. We fear what people will think; we crave their approval; we dread their rejection. This fear keeps people from confessing Christ, from obeying His commands, from standing for truth. The choice is between the glory that comes from man and the glory that comes from God, and we cannot serve both.

Bring it to honest self-examination. Help students ask where the love of human approval keeps them from openly following Christ, from confessing Him, from obeying a clear command, from standing apart from the crowd. This is searching, because the people in the text believed and still would not confess. Belief that will not confess Christ for fear of others falls short of saving faith. The call is to value the approval of God above the approval of people, and to let belief

become open, confessing, obedient faith. Ask students whose approval they most fear losing, and what it would mean to seek God's glory above it.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Persistent unbelief after the signs as a matter of the hardened heart, not lack of evidence (John 12:37–41).
- The judicial hardening that follows repeated rejection of the light, without denying human responsibility.
- Belief that will not confess Christ for fear of others falling short of saving faith (John 12:42–43; Romans 10:9–10).
- The love of human approval as a great obstacle to openly following Christ.
- The choice between the glory that comes from man and the glory that comes from God.
- Saving faith as open, confessing, and obedient (Matthew 10:32–33).

Discussion Prompts

- Why did many still not believe after all the signs?
- How can loving human approval keep people from confessing Christ?
- Whose approval do you most fear losing, and how does that affect your following of Christ?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back over this chapter, from Mary's perfume to the grain of wheat to the humble King. What is one specific way Jesus is forming you to pour out lavish devotion and to follow Him in the path of dying to self?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The capstone question gathers the chapter's themes, Mary's lavish devotion, the grain of wheat, and the humble King, into a call to wholehearted, self-denying devotion. This is the formation the chapter aims at.

Help students hold the two emphases together. Mary models pouring out; the grain of wheat models dying to self. Both are aspects of the same wholehearted devotion to Christ: giving Him our best and surrendering our self-will. The disciple this chapter forms both lavishes love on Christ and follows Him in death to self.

Make it concrete. Ask each student to name one specific way Jesus is forming them to pour out lavish devotion (in worship, giving, time, or surrender) and one way He is calling them to follow the grain of wheat into dying to self (a comfort, ambition, or grip on control to release).

Close in the hope of the chapter. The path of dying to self is the path of fruit; the lavish devotion poured out on Christ is never wasted. The humble King who went to the cross calls His followers

to the same path, and it leads to life. Let students leave ready to give extravagantly and to fall, like the grain of wheat, into the ground that yields a harvest.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Wholehearted devotion combining lavish love and dying to self.
- Pouring out on Christ and surrendering self-will as one devotion.
- The path of dying to self leading to fruit and life.
- Concrete, specific formation as the goal of the lesson.

Discussion Prompts

- How is Jesus forming you to pour out lavish devotion?
- Where is He calling you to follow the grain of wheat into dying to self?
- What is one concrete step of devotion or surrender you will take?