

The Gospel of John

Lesson 17: Mary's Anointing and the Triumphal Entry -- John 12:1-50

The aroma fills the whole house before anyone fully understands what is happening. Mary of Bethany, whose brother Lazarus is sitting at the table alive, takes a pound of pure nard, an extravagant perfume worth nearly a year's wages, breaks it open, and pours it over Jesus' feet, wiping them with her hair. It is reckless, lavish, almost scandalous in its abandon. Judas objects, dressing his greed in the language of charity: this could have been sold for the poor. But Jesus defends her. "Leave her alone... She has kept it for the day of my burial." Mary, perhaps better than anyone, has sensed where this is heading, and she pours out everything she has on the One who is about to pour out everything for her.

The very next day the mood could not be more different. Jesus rides into Jerusalem on a young donkey, and the crowds go wild, waving palm branches and shouting, "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel!" It looks like a coronation. But the King comes not on a war horse but on a donkey, fulfilling the ancient prophecy of a humble king bringing peace. The crowd wants a conquering hero who will throw off Rome; Jesus comes as the gentle King who will conquer by dying. Within days the same crowds, disappointed in the kind of king He turned out to be, will be calling for His blood.

In the middle of this chapter, some Greeks come asking to see Jesus, and their arrival seems to signal to Him that the hour has finally come. And He says the words that unlock the meaning of everything: "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit." There is the secret of the whole gospel, and of the whole Christian life. Life comes through death. Fruit comes through falling into the ground. The King will reign by being lifted up on a cross, and He calls everyone who would follow Him to the same strange and beautiful path of dying to self in order to truly live.

And then, with His soul troubled and the cross in view, Jesus makes His final public appeal. He has done sign after sign, and still many will not believe, fulfilling the sorrowful words of Isaiah. Yet He cries out one more time: "Whoever believes in me, believes not in me but in him who sent me." He is the light come into the world, and the time to walk in the light is now, before the darkness falls. This chapter stands at the hinge between His public ministry and the cross. Read it and watch Mary pour out her treasure, watch the humble King ride in, and hear the grain of wheat tell you how life is really found.

Group Discussion: Mary poured out a year's wages of perfume on Jesus in an act of extravagant devotion, while Judas called it waste (vv. 3-6). What does our culture, and even our own hearts, tend to call "waste" when it comes to devotion to Christ, and what does Mary teach us about lavish love for Him?

Personal Reflection: Jesus said, “unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies... but if it dies, it bears much fruit” (v. 24). Where is Jesus inviting you to let something die, a comfort, an ambition, a grip on control, so that real fruit can grow, and what makes that hard?

Read John 12:1–50

Study Questions

1. 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?
2. 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?
3. 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?
4. 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?
5. 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?
6. 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?
7. 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?
8. 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?
9. 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?
10. 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?

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: Zechariah 9:9, the humble king coming on a donkey, bringing salvation; Philippians 3:7–11, counting all things loss to gain Christ and share His sufferings; Galatians 2:20, being crucified with Christ so that He lives in us; Isaiah 53:1–3, the suffering servant despised and rejected; Matthew 16:24–26, denying self, taking up the cross, and finding life by losing it.