

LUKE 10:38–42; JOHN 11; JOHN 12:1–11

Mary of Bethany: Always at His Feet

Lesson at a glance

Three Gospel scenes, the same woman, the same posture in all three. Mary of Bethany is found at Jesus' feet to listen (Luke 10), to grieve (John 11), and to worship (John 12). The lesson walks through each of the three scenes in turn, and ends with what Mary teaches us about the shape of a devoted life. The thread is the love of Christ for the woman who simply wants to be near Him, and His willingness to defend her three different times against three different critics.

Goals for this session

First, that each woman would be drawn back to a posture of being with Jesus, especially if she has drifted into doing for Him without sitting with Him.

Second, that grieving women in the room would be comforted by the Jesus who wept with Mary at the tomb of Lazarus.

Third, that each woman would consider where God might be inviting her to extravagant, costly worship, even if the watching world would call it wasteful.

Fourth, that the group would take a small step away from Martha-style anxiety toward Mary-style presence in the week ahead.

Preparing to lead

Read the three passages in order earlier in the week: Luke 10:38 to 42, John 11, John 12:1 to 11. Read John 11 in one sitting; it is a long chapter and reads best in one breath.

Pray for each woman by name. Mary's lesson is gentle, but it may stir tears in women who are currently grieving, or in women who recognize they have spent too long in the kitchen and not enough at the feet of the Lord.

If any woman in your group has lost someone recently, consider reaching out before the meeting. The Lazarus scene will land hard. Better that she comes ready than ambushed.

Sensitive topics in this lesson

Grief, especially recent grief (questions 7 to 9, and the For Thought and Discussion box on grief). John 11 is the Bible's most tender passage on the tears of Christ with us. Be ready for tears in the room.

Religious busyness as a substitute for presence (questions 3 to 4, the For Thought and Discussion box on Martha tendencies). Many faithful church women have, without realizing it, traded sitting at Jesus' feet for serving the church to exhaustion. The two should not be set against each other, but they can be confused.

Criticism of other women's worship (question 12). Judas's criticism of Mary is a sober reminder. Some of the harshest judgments we make about other Christian women are about how they worship. Lead this one humbly.

Costly devotion (questions 10 to 11). Mary's perfume was probably her life savings. The application question may press on women's relationship to money, comfort, or reputation. Do not rush past it.

Suggested 60- to 75-minute schedule

Five minutes: welcome.

Five minutes: open in prayer. Read Luke 10:38 to 42 aloud.

Five minutes: warm-up. Ask each woman whether she is by temperament more like Martha or more like Mary, and to name one strength and one struggle of being that way.

Thirty-five to forty minutes: discussion. Choose six or seven questions in advance.

Five to ten minutes: "Your response" reflection.

Five minutes: closing prayer.

Discussion priorities

Make sure these are among the questions you discuss: 4 (the one thing necessary), 8 (Jesus wept), 10 and 11 (the cost of the perfume), and 16 (what it would look like to sit at His feet this week).

Notes on key questions

Question 2. Mary takes the place of a disciple in training at Jesus' feet. That posture was usually reserved for men. Jesus honors her by allowing it. This is one of many quiet places in the Gospels where the dignity of women in the kingdom is on display.

Question 4. "One thing is necessary." The phrase echoes elsewhere in Scripture (Psalm 27:4; Philippians 3:13; Mark 10:21). The point in Luke 10 is not that Martha's serving is wrong; it is that Mary's choice cannot be taken from her. Sitting with Jesus is the one thing nothing else can replace.

Question 5. John 11:5 to 6 contains one of the most surprising "so"s in Scripture. Jesus loved them, so He stayed where He was for two more days. God's love sometimes looks like delay. This is sober but important. Lazarus had to die, so that the deeper miracle could happen.

Question 8. "Jesus wept" (John 11:35) is the shortest verse in the Bible and one of the most important. The Greek word translated "deeply moved" elsewhere in the passage carries the sense of indignation. Jesus is sad and angry at what death has done to His friends. Death was never God's design. The same Lord weeps with us at gravesides today, even knowing the resurrection is coming.

Questions 10 and 11. The perfume cost about a year's wages. Mary breaks the jar, pours it on Jesus' feet, and wipes them with her hair. Every act communicates something: total abandonment of the gift, intimate worship, and a willingness to be misunderstood. Linger here. Ask the group where God may be inviting them to that kind of extravagance.

Question 13. Jesus says Mary did this for the day of His burial. None of the apostles understood that Jesus was about to die. Mary may not have understood either. But what she did was right in a way she did not yet realize. Sometimes our acts of devotion mean more than we know.

Question 15. Jesus defends Mary three different times in the Gospels: against Martha, against the mourners, against Judas. Every time He sides with her devotion. He will side with the women in your group the same way when they choose Him and someone criticizes them for it.

Questions 16 to 18. Personal response. Give the women time to write. The question about which Mary they are most often (listening, weeping, or worshiping) is worth lingering over. The extravagance question may surface concrete decisions about money, time, or reputation. Be ready to encourage real steps.

About the Study Skills in this lesson

Two Study Skills appear in Lesson 10. Following a Word or Phrase Through Scripture is illustrated with "one thing is necessary." Encourage the women to try this with another phrase that strikes them. The second skill, Harmonizing Parallel Gospel Accounts Carefully, is essential for the Gospels. Take a moment in the group to read Matthew 26:6 to 13, Mark 14:3 to 9, and John 12:1 to 8 side by side. They are the same event, told from three angles. Luke 7:36 to 50 (next week) is a different event. The skill of distinguishing these is one the women will use for the rest of their lives in the Word.

A suggested closing prayer

Pray your own prayer. A sample, if you would like one:

"Father, thank You for Mary of Bethany, the woman who kept finding her way back to the feet of Your Son. Thank You that her sitting was honored, her weeping was joined, her worship was defended. Thank You for the Lord Jesus, who wept at the tomb of His friend and is not embarrassed by our tears. Forgive

us for the times we have been more like Martha than like Mary. Help us, this week, to sit again at Your feet, and to give what we have most extravagantly to You. In the name of Jesus we pray. Amen."

Looking ahead to Lesson 11

Next week is the sinful woman in Luke 7:36 to 50. The lesson is in some ways a companion to this week's, another woman pouring out perfume at the feet of Jesus, but in a different city, with a different host, and for a different reason. Encourage the women to read the two passages side by side and to notice the differences. The Lesson 10 Study Skill on harmonizing parallel passages will pay dividends here.