

Hugo Bouter

The Anointing At Bethany

"Then, six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, where Lazarus was who had been dead, whom He had raised from the dead. There they made Him a supper; and Martha served, but Lazarus was one of those who sat at the table with Him. 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."

John 12:1-3 NKJV

Worship is The *Anointing* of The Lord

A beautiful Biblical example of worship is found in John 12. The Lord was going to die, and Mary of Bethany knew this because she had sat at the Lord's feet and received His teaching. She felt what was going to happen. Therefore, she wanted to anoint Him to prepare Him for His burial. The Lord recognized this, and He expressed His great appreciation for her act of love, saying, "She has kept this [the precious spikenard] for the day of My burial" (Jn. 12:7).

This is confirmed by the accounts of Matthew and Mark: "She did it for My burial" (Mt. 26:12); "She has come beforehand to anoint My body for burial" (Mk. 14:8). This anointing was not for the purpose of appointing Him to a particular position, as was customary under the Old Covenant when people were anointed as kings, priests or prophets. Of course, Christ was anointed King, Priest, and Prophet. This was done by God, and indeed the Lord holds all these offices. But anointing Him as the One who died is something else! It means – and this is the symbolic value of Mary's act for ourselves – we honor Him as the One who died for us; we remember

Him in His suffering and death, and we proclaim His death until He comes. We, who were formerly dead but are raised to new life by Him (as is shown in Lazarus), are not the focus of the scene. Rather, the focus is the Lord who came to lay down His life; the Prince of Life voluntarily entered into death to take up His life again on the other side of death and the grave (Jn. 10:17-18; Acts 3:15).

Passover And Supper

The Passover was the feast of Israel's redemption from Egypt (Ex. 12). The Lord's Supper is the feast of our deliverance from the curse of sin. We are saved from judgment; we were dead and have become alive again. But the Lord's Supper is especially in remembrance of Him (1 Cor. 11:23-26). This meal is for the One who loved us to death, and its purpose is to honor and magnify Him. Compare this with the great wedding supper that the King – a picture of God the Father – prepared for His Son (Mt. 22:2). We can also think of the wedding at Cana, where Jesus was initially simply one of the guests, together with His disciples. He became the central figure there, however, as soon as He changed the water into wine and thereby revealed His glory (Jn. 2:11). That divine glory was likewise revealed in the raising of Lazarus (Jn. 11:4,40).

In keeping with this, it is a fitting detail in John's account that Mary – where the Son revealed His divine glory – anointed only the feet of Jesus (12:3). She also dried His feet with her hair, placing her honor, her glory, at His feet (consider 1 Cor. 11:15). According to Matthew and Mark, where we see the Lord as the King and the Servant-Prophet respectively, it is also true that the oil was poured out on His head (Mt. 26:7; Mk 14:3). No doubt, in this event both the Lord's head and feet were anointed, but John's rendering is in accordance with the exalted character in which He is shown in his gospel.

Worship Costs Us Everything

Only Mark mentions that the alabaster flask with precious spikenard was broken (Mk. 14:3). This was a symbolic act with a deep meaning: worship costs us everything. Christ sacrificed His life. He was "bruised for our iniquities," and the precious sacrifice of His life was "poured out ... unto death" (Isa. 53:5,12). It is no different with the precious treasure we as believers carry with us in our bodies. These "earthen vessels" are delivered to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of

Jesus may be manifested in our mortal flesh (2 Cor. 4:7-18; consider the breaking of the jars by Gideon's men in Judg. 7:19).

Further, in John 12 we see with Martha the work of service. Martha served (v. 2) as she did in Luke 10:40. Here, however, she was no longer preoccupied with the importance and significance of her own service; everything now happened in harmony with the Master. Lazarus shows the aspect of communion, of sitting in the presence of the Lord. In Mary, who, in Luke 10:39, sat at the feet of the Lord to listen to His word, we have clearly in John 12 the aspect of worship. One cannot exist without the other: listening to His word leads to the worship of His person. Communion, service and worship in the presence of the Master are three things that characterize us as members of God's family.

A Good Work To Him

The act of love by Mary had two effects. First, the fragrance of the spikenard filled the house. There was an elevated atmosphere, reminiscent of that in the sanctuary where the priests did daily service and lit fragrant incense on the golden altar (Ex. 30:7-8). This brings us to a question of the families of believers in our day. Is Christ the exalted Guest there? Is the anointing oil, spiritually speaking, of worship a reality? What about our congregations? Are they, as true temples of the living God, filled with the fragrance of the adoration of the Lamb?

What Mary did was followed by the reaction of Judas Iscariot and the rest of the disciples. The light of Christ made all things manifest and showed the corruption of the human heart, for Judas was a thief (Jn. 12:4-6). The Lord would not always be with the disciples here on earth, but the poor would always be here. He would return to the Father and henceforth be the center of heavenly glory.

Mary had done a good work for Him while it was still possible here on earth. This good work was a work for Him personally, an act that expressed her personal love and esteem for Him (Mt. 26:10; Mk. 14:6). This is an important example for us as Christians. In the celebration of the Lord's Supper we can together offer the precious spikenard of our worship to Him and gladden the Master's heart with offerings of praise and thanksgiving (see Song 1:12). And we do not lack anything, for the fragrance of the costly oil in the house of God also gladdens our hearts. In this, here on earth, we have a foretaste of the heavenly wedding banquet – the wedding of the Lamb (Rev. 19:7-9).

We worship at Thy holy feet,
Thou glorious Lamb of God;
Thy blood has washed us from our sins,
And brought us nigh to God.

We worship at Thy holy feet,
Once hated Nazarene;
In heaven's unsullied light Thou art,
God's glory in Thee seen.

We worship at Thy holy feet;
Thou'rt evermore the same,
The First and Last, the Faithful, True,
All glory to Thy name.

Samuel Tomkins (1841–1926)

