

AM John 12:1-11

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 06 July 2025

Preacher: Rev Ronnie Christie

[0 : 00] The Gospel of John, chapter 11, and we're going to read from verse 45 to the end of the chapter. In our minds, we're just going to read the last part of chapter 11, and then later on we'll go on to chapter 12.

John 11, verse 45. Many of the Jews, therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what he did, believed in him. But some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done.

So the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered the council and said, What are we to do? For this man performs many signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation.

But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, You know nothing at all, nor do you understand, that it is better for you that one man should die for the people, not that the whole nation should perish.

He did not say this of his own accord, but being high priest that year, he prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but also to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad.

[1 : 43] So from that day on, they made plans to put him to death. Jesus therefore no longer walked openly among the Jews, but went from there to the region near the wilderness, to a town called Ephraim, and there he stayed with the disciples.

Now the Passover of the Jews was at hand, and many went up from the country to Jerusalem before the Passover to purify themselves. They were looking for Jesus and saying to one another, as they stood in the temple, What do you think?

That he will not come to the feast at all? Now the chief priests and the Pharisees had given orders, that if anyone knew where he was, he should let them know, that they might arrest him.

Just to there for the moment, may God bless to us this reading. We're going to read in John's Gospel, chapter 12, and we'll read verses 1 to 11, the passage that we're going to look at this morning.

John chapter 12, verses 1 to 11. Six days before the Passover, Jesus therefore came to Bethany, where Lazarus was, whom Jesus had raised from the dead.

[2 : 59] So they gave a dinner for him there. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those reclining with him at table. Mary therefore took a pound of expensive ointment made from pure nard and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped his feet with her hair.

The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume, but Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples, he was about to betray him, said, why was this ointment not sold for 300 denarii and given to the poor?

He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief, and having charge of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it.

Jesus said, leave her alone so that she may keep it for the day of my burial. For the poor, you always have with you, but you not always have me.

When the large crowd of the Jews learned that Jesus was there, they came, not only account of him, but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead.

[4 : 13] So the chief priests made plans to put Lazarus to death as well, because on account of him, many of the Jews were going away and believing in Jesus.

May God bless to us this reading too. John's Gospel, chapter 12, and we'll look at this passage that we read, both sections here, Mary announced Jesus at Bethany and the plot to kill Lazarus.

No particular text, we'll go through it bit by bit. Now if I say this is a story about devotion, I think you would immediately say, sure it is.

It's a story about Mary's devotion. And so it is. But is it only about Mary's devotion? For example, who made this feast, his celebratory meal for Jesus?

We're told in Matthew's Gospel that this was held in the house of Simon the leper. So he was devoted to Jesus as well, showing his gratitude perhaps from being freed from his leprosy, his gratitude over Lazarus being raised from the dead.

[5 : 25] He showed his devotion by making this reception for Jesus. And what about Martha? We're told that she was serving. If it wasn't in her own house, as I'm suggesting it wasn't, then she said, you're having a feast, I'll come and help.

Why did she do that? We don't know. Perhaps she did it out of a sense of duty. But perhaps she said, Jesus came when we asked him to come, eventually.

Jesus spoke to me and said, I am the resurrection and the life. Jesus rebuked me when I suggested they shouldn't take away the stone. Jesus raised Lazarus.

I want to show my devotion. And she did it in the way that came naturally to a woman of her temperament. She did it in serving the meal. Perhaps that was her devotion, her expression of devotion too.

So it's not just about Mary. There were others that were involved too. But enough of them. I'm wanting to show that especially Jesus shows his devotion here.

[6 : 33] His devotion to his mission. His devotion to the path of duty. And that here we see him giving himself, going to the cross, the shadow of the cross falls upon him here.

And he walks towards it. Devoted to his mission that had been given to him. And at a practical level, what we want to finish with is this idea.

That if we understand and appreciate the devotion of Jesus to the mission that had been given to him, then there's no greater motive to stir up the sort of devotion in our hearts that Mary shows that Mary shows to Jesus here.

So we're looking at two aspects here. The devotion of Mary to Jesus and the devotion of Jesus to his mission. Or the devotion of Jesus to the purpose of God.

Or the devotion of Jesus to his people. These two main ideas. Now, Mary's devotion is the obvious thing here. And you can see right away that it is considered an extreme form of devotion.

[7 : 44] There are two things in this story that are worth pointing out that are ordinary. But Mary goes about it in an unusual way.

The anointing with oil was not unusual. We have it in Psalm 45 in the context of a wedding. The atmosphere is enhanced by literally the anointing with oil.

And we've got it in Psalm 23. For example, he anoints our head with oil. And that is a figurative way of expressing the idea of festivity and joy at a great festival.

And so, the oil was poured out. The oil was poured out. And Jesus is not an unusual feature of life at that time in those circumstances.

Similarly, people would have their feet washed when they came for a meal of this nature. They come no doubt clean from their homes, but they come with sandals on their feet along dusty paths or maybe muddy paths.

[8 : 53] But one way or another, they come with sandals on their feet and they arrive with dirty feet. And it wasn't uncommon that their feet would be washed. And so, what we've got here are two things that were fairly frequently done in those circumstances.

Anointing with oil and the washing of the feet. But what Mary does is that she combines these together and she does so in an extreme fashion. So, she pours out this oil not only in Jesus' head as Matthew's Gospel tells us, but also on his feet.

and that seems to me is an extreme expression of devotion. It's not just the normal way of treating an honoured guest.

It's over the top from the human point of view because it's an expression of our love and devotion to Jesus. Why use oil for the feet when water would have done equally well, if not better?

Why wipe his feet with her hair? For the towel would have served as well, maybe even better. It's all an expression of our personal devotion. And it's the cost of the ointment that is mentioned here.

[10 : 06] Pure nard, we're told. Nard is an ointment that comes from a spikenard plant which grows in the Himalayas. So, you don't need to know very much about geography to know that this was imported therefore into the land of Israel at that time and therefore would be an expensive item.

And the whole idea is that this was a very expensive way of doing things and it all is an expression of how devoted to her, to Jesus she really was.

Here is the outpouring of her gratitude. She's saying, I'm glad you came even though you delayed. I'm glad you came. I'm glad that when I was crying you burst into tears.

I'm glad that you stood at the graveside and said, Lazarus come out and Lazarus came out. I'm glad for all that and here is the expression of my gratitude and devotion to you in this act of service that she is performing pouring out this oil this precious oil in this way.

The value of the oil is a measure of the extent of her devotion. I think we can see that quite easily in the story. Now, the question is this is this an example for us and of course we have got to be very careful here because in one way it undoubtedly is and in another way it is not necessarily so.

[11 : 32] Now, let me just go into that a wee bit. What I mean is this. Is devotion like this appropriate when faced with great things that God has done for us?

And of course everybody knows the answer to that one. Yes, this is an example to us. Express your devotion for all the goodness that God has brought to you. Express it in an extravagant way if you wish.

Make sure that you express your gratitude to God. So this is telling us count your blessings, name them one by one. In everything give thanks to God.

It is telling us to enter into the spirit of the psalmist which frequently said praise the Lord, praise the Lord. And we'll be singing some of these psalms of praise this evening in particular. But you know them all anyway.

Praise the Lord is typical of the psalm. It's typical of the Christian life. Everything gives thanks. So an expression of love and devotion is altogether in place in the life of the Christian.

[12 : 37] And we can well say am I as grateful as Mary was? Am I as devoted to Jesus as she was? Or even more than she was because of so much more to be grateful for?

At that level this is an example. However the problem here is the way that she expresses this. Is this way of doing things something that we should try and follow?

Because you see even here there's a problem about it. Okay the problem is raised by Judas and we'll go into his story a wee bit more in a minute. But he does raise the very valid point.

Could this not have been sold for 200 or 300 denarii and given to the poor? Isn't this a rather impractical way of expressing devotion?

Why waste that money when you could show your devotion in another much more practical fashion? And I just want to ask something about that.

[13 : 47] Does Jesus seem to accept this? He rebukes Judas in effect and he says the poor you have always with me but you do not always have me.

So he's defending Mary here. He's defending an extravagance here. He's saying it's quite fitting that she should express her devotion in this way. Now the question therefore is is this normal?

Is this Jesus laying down a rule for everybody? Or is this something said in particular circumstances? Is he saying devotion to me is more important than caring for the poor?

Going to the prayer meeting is more important than helping your neighbour? Devoting yourself to religion is more important than caring for others?

Does religious worship trump social responsibility? That's a question that raises in my mind at least. And we've got to say no this is not a general rule that Jesus is laying down here.

[14 : 56] This is something appropriate for that occasion but only for that occasion. And he's not saying that in that way Mary's devotion is a model for us to follow.

And we say that for various reasons first of all. Jesus never had any problem about caring for the poor even when he gave himself to prayer. It wasn't prayer or caring for the poor.

It was both. He did them both. He was devoted to them both. He went to extremes in both ways. And when he talked about those that were going to on the day of judgment to be received into the kingdom he didn't say blessed are you who always attended the prayer meeting.

Blessed are you who never missed a service. Blessed are you who always gave generously to the church. He says blessed are those who helped the poor, who fed the hungry, who visited those that were in prison, who clothed those that were naked.

It's social concern that he points to there. And there's no way in which we can interpret this as Jesus saying it's religion, it's service, it's religious service that counts and social responsibility is on the back burner as it were.

[16 : 09] That's not the way we have to do it. Because you see here he says the poor you have always with me, with you, which is fair enough. But then he says but you, but me you do not have with me.

So what is motivating him here is not the thought that they can always do for the poor whatever they want to. The thing that he's bringing to their attention is his own absence.

He's not going to be with them for long and that's the reason why he says what he does here. So what I'm saying is that Mary's devotion is a model for us.

But the way that we express our devotion do not follow the same pattern as Mary's devotion but can be more practically expressed.

And I think you'd understand the sort of thing I'm meaning. It isn't just by going to all the services or spending long times in prayer or having long quiet times or whatever that we express our devotion to Jesus.

[17 : 10] It's in a more practical way that we can find, that we can express our faith. A couple of examples that I have in mind and I hope you see them relevant. It used to be I think I can say when I was young which is some time ago now, people at funerals, everybody would give a wreath to the funeral.

And you measured the popularity of a person by the number of wreaths that they got. And now, generally speaking, it says family flowers only or no flowers but donations to something or something.

And I think, for myself, I think that's much more wise. We're expressing our gratitude for the life that has been taken from us. Not in a kind of meaningless way by sending expensive flowers that molded away on the graveside.

we're doing something practical, giving to a charity in memory of the one that is meeting. I think you would appreciate that. And that's the sort of thing I mean. Or here's another example. Supposing there's a rich widow that comes and says, I want to donate £20,000 to the congregation here in memory of my late husband.

And you say, fine. And then she says, I want to make two stained glass windows for you and beautify this building in memory of my husband. And I reckon most of us would say in the deacon's courts, to get any sense, would say, well thanks for the donation, but really it couldn't be used in a more practical way.

[18 : 42] £20,000 would keep us going in our programme for helping the poor. It would keep us going for years and years. And that would be a more suitable memorial, wouldn't it?

that's the sort of thing of mind. Let's make sure that we express devotion, but that we do so in a practical way. So, that's Mary's devotion. And it tells us, okay, let's cultivate devotion to Christ.

Let's express extravagantly how much we love him and how much he's done for us and how grateful to him we are. But let's consider the most reasonable and useful and practical way of doing it today.

Mary. That's Mary's devotion. Now, I'm going on to this other bit that may not at all be so obvious. But, you know, I don't think that John said, now what am I going to tell next?

I think what I'll do is I'll put in this story about Mary just to encourage people's devotion. I think John was saying, now what was the big thing that happened at this point?

[19 : 48] Jesus' dedication to his mission. And the story of Mary is included because it takes on the storyline that he has been following. And that's the way that I am going to take this.

Already, the shadow of the cross has fallen on the life of Jesus. We've already suggested that when he was troubled over the death of Lazarus, it was in part because he was troubled over his own death, which he saw looming in the non-too-distant future.

And we've already studied how the Jewish council met together and said it's necessary that one man die for the people and not that the whole nation should perish. So they wanted to put Jesus to death.

And now that story is continued. It's continued in this incident with Mary. And that, I think, is John's purpose in telling the story. So let's see how that works out.

There's three things here, really. First of all, Judas is introduced here. Now, Judas is not, as far as I remember, been spoken about in this gospel previously, except on one occasion when Jesus said, did I not choose you, the twelve, and yet one of you is a devil.

[21 : 14] So already there's been an intimation there's one of you that isn't quite right. And now he's been introduced in his true character, and he's being named.

So we have Judas, one of his disciples, he was about to betray him. So in the midst of this celebratory meal, in the midst of this extreme devotion, expression of devotion, here's a sad note introduced.

Here's a betrayer, a traitor amongst them. And his character is worked out here as well. He seems to be interested in the poor, but he's not really interested in the poor.

He has no interest in Mary and her devotion, and he doesn't say, oh well, that's a great thing she's doing, she must be really grateful. All he can think about is himself.

He wants that money in his bag, so he can take it for himself. So he's portrayed here as a thief. And that's the sort of note that is being introduced into the brightness of these festivities.

[22 : 22] He tells the story, and you're all animated and think, this is wonderful, and you enter into the spirit of the occasion. And then the shadow of the cross falls upon the event by the mention of Judas here, the one that would betray him.

that's what John is trying to say here. This event is just something that was leading on to Judas betraying him. That's the first idea we've got here.

The second idea that we've got here is that for Jesus, this event was not simply an expression of Mary's devotion, it was an anticipation of his burial.

Now we do have problems here of translation in this passage, and it depends which version you're using, because the three main ones that I look at in English say different things.

Leave her alone so that she may keep it for the day of my burial, says Jesus in the ESV. In KJV he says, let her alone against the day of my burying, has she kept this?

[23 : 28] And in NIV, leave her alone, it was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial. I must say, I don't know which is the correct translation because it's very difficult to get what he's meaning here.

But you see, whichever way you translate it, one thing is plain. Jesus related this to her burial, to his burial. Just as on burial, people gather ointments and spices and go and anoint the body.

And so, they preserve it from decay to some extent, and they cover up the bad odours. But this sort of thing was done to a person that had died on his burial.

And now what's happening is that Mary is doing that for Jesus. And that's the big thing in Jesus' mind here. You will not always have me with you. And he connects that too with not just his death, but his burial that is foreshadowed, portrayed in this anointment of his body by Mary with this ointment.

She's doing what you do with a dead person. And Jesus knows that that's appropriate because in a few days that is going to be him.

[24 : 46] He's anticipating his death and his burial here. And that idea is continued also in what looks to be a postscript to this story, verses 9 to 11.

When the large crowd of the Jews learned that Jesus was there, they came not only on account of him, but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. So the chief priests made plans to put Lazarus to death as well.

Lazarus to death as well. There's a reminder that there's already what would be called nowadays a fatwa, a declaration of intent to kill.

This time by the Jewish authorities. They say he's under sentence of death. anybody that betrays him to us, tells us where he is, they can get a reward for it, because we're going to kill the man.

And now that story of opposition is increased. It's again increased by all these people that were so keen, or so taken away with the way that Jesus had raised Lazarus.

[25 : 54] The women had come from Jerusalem to mourn with Mary and Martha, and they had seen this event and they'd gone back home to Jerusalem and told people. They were women of standing apparently because they told the authorities as well.

And because of this, there was this opposition to Jesus raised. And now John is saying, just as that opposition was raised originally, so it's continuing.

There's that same spirit of we must calm down this popularity of Jesus. We must do everything in our power to silence him and to bring this movement to nothing.

And now it's not only Jesus that they're intent on killing, it's Lazarus that they're intent on killing as well. So it's a story of opposition leading to death that is in mind here.

And I think you see, if you put these things together, you see the reason why John was telling the story. He was saying, we know that Jesus is now under sentence of condemnation.

[27 : 00] See how he's working out. There's a betrayer amongst him. He himself knows that he's going to die and be buried. And the authorities are just as opposed to him as they ever were, more so than ever, because now they're going to try and kill Lazarus as well.

And John is saying, here's a man who saw these things, and he went on in the path of obedience. What do you do when you've got a traitor in your midst?

A person in the board of governors that doesn't agree with anybody. You get rid of him if you can. But Jesus knows that there's a traitor amongst him and he doesn't get rid of him.

Why not? Because he's going willingly to the cross and the traitor is the agent employed in getting him there. So he's not going to weed out the traitor.

Because he's intent on going to the cross. What does a man do when he sees death and burial just in front of him? He avoids it as much as he can.

[28 : 03] He goes to the doctor of his ill and tries to get the latest medicine and techniques to help him. He runs away from death. Most people do. They run away from death.

Unless they're very old and cushions, then they run towards it. Otherwise, people avoid it. Put it off as long as possible. present is not there. Don't talk about it. Jesus wasn't like that.

He was the opposite. He sees his death approaching and he welcomes it. He knows he's going to be buried soon. And he doesn't bat an eyelid or try and avoid it because he's intent on his mission.

And he sees this opposition that's been raised against him. And he still goes on to Jerusalem and lives out his life there until these last days come when he gives the sacrifice on the cross.

This is Jesus devoted to the purpose of God, intent on doing what the Father asked him to do. Having in mind only one thing, I must save my people.

[29 : 05] I must go to the cross. I must give my life as a sacrifice for those that have been committed to me. I must lay down my life in order that they may have life.

I must suffer the pains of death in order that they might be freed from death. I must feel the punishment of sin in order that they may be freed from it.

This is Jesus devoted to his people, devoted to the purpose of God. This is a story about his devotion. And then we've got to put these two things together at a practical level.

There is nothing so likely to move us to the sort of devotion that Mary had as a thought about how devoted Jesus was to the task that was before him.

Think about what happened to Mary. And you might say she had great reason for giving her devotion to Jesus in the way she did. But what he did for Mary is nothing like what he does for his people.

[30 : 13] And therefore the devotion of Mary should just be a light thing in comparison to the great devotion that we show to Jesus for what he has done on behalf of his people.

What did he do for Mary? He raised Lazarus from the dead temporarily. A great thing. We're not decrying the miracle.

But what has he done for his people? He's freed them from spiritual death. He's freed from the condemnation of a righteous God. He's freed them from the anguish of standing before God and being cast out from his presence.

And he saved us in the physical sense as well. We will be raised from the dead at the last day. He's abolished death and he's done it forever.

forever. He's laid down the basis for a life without death. Now Lazarus died. He was raised to death. He was raised from the dead and he died again.

[31 : 21] What Jesus has done is much greater than that. We have life eternal in him. How much more grateful we should be. What did it cost Jesus to raise Lazarus?

You see, not much. he prayed and it happened. He asked his father and it came about. Not a costly thing we would say.

But what did it cost him in order that he might do what he has done for us? It cost him everything. He went to the cross.

He gave his life. He suffered under the anguish of dereliction. God turning his back upon him because he was being treated as a sin bearer.

The ultimate price he gave, the ultimate sacrifice he made in comparison with what it cost him to raise Lazarus, it's an immense thing that he did for us.

[32 : 21] Our devotion should reflect that. What was the atmosphere when he raised Lazarus from the dead? Well, he did so with the loving support of Mary and Martha and many of the crowd as well who said if you had been here, Lazarus would not have died.

But even now we know that whatever you ask will be done for you. There was faith, there was a supportive family there behind him and there was a believing crowd afterwards.

It was in a positive, positive situation that he did what he did for Lazarus. And what was the situation when he gave himself on the cross? The very opposite of that.

They mocked him, they scorned him, they ill-treated him, they abused him in all sorts of ways. And his disciples by and large had forsaken him and fled. Okay, there were some there in support, but by and large they had forsaken him and fled.

Very, very negative situation, very, very adverse the situation, the complete opposite of what happened in the case of Lazarus. And that's what makes me say.

[33 : 32] If Mary was devoted to Jesus because of what he did for Lazarus, how much more devoted should we be to him because of what he did for us and the way that he did it by dying on the cross?

So where does that leave us with our devotion? And I suspected that most of us will have to say that in comparison to Mary's devotion, ours is a pretty poor devotion.

We're not as great as we should be, we're not as expressive of it as we ought to be, and we are not as extravagant in our devotion as she was, and yet how much more reason we have for being devoted.

If we know the Lord, if we're resting upon him, if we've come to experience his grace. So if you don't know that, come to him as a sinner and rest upon his mercy, and plead that the death of Christ would cover your sin, and the sacrifice made there would bring you into a proper relationship with God.

And then go on and think about devotion. Paul said, present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your reasonable worship.

[34 : 50] Different ways of translating that, but reasonable worship will do me fine. just as Mary gave her worship to God by pouring out that oil in those particular circumstances, what have we to do?

We have to present ourselves as a living sacrifice. That is a reasonable service. Our bodily faculties have they begun over to him. Our hands we have to use in the work of God.

Our feet are to lead us in the paths of God. Our eyesight we have to look in things that are fitting and appropriate and turn them away from things that are ugly and sinful. Our voice we have to use not in swearing or bad language or abuse or slander or gossip, but we have to use for his honour and glory.

And that's the way that we present our bodies as a living sacrifice to God. How we precisely do it is up to us. What this means particularly is for each one of us to decide.

But the general principle is clear. If you have seen half of what Jesus has done for you through dying on the cross, you'll be much more devoted to him than even Mary was.

[36 : 02] And that surely is a challenge to all of us. May God bless to us his word.