

(4) The life of gratitude

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Date: 20 April 2008

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[0 : 00] Our reading this morning is from the Gospel of John, chapter 11, verse 55 to 12, verse 11, and that's on page 1083 of the Bibles.

Chapter 11 and verse 55. 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, so that they might arrest him. Six days before the Passover, Jesus therefore came to Bethany, where Lazarus was, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. So they gave a dinner for him there. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those reclining with him at the 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.

[1 : 16] But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples, he who was about to betray him, said, Why was this ointment not sold for 300 denario 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. The poor you always have with you, but you do not always have me.

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, because on account of him, many of the Jews were going away and believing in Jesus.

[2 : 18] Thanks, Lois, very much for reading to us. Do keep your Bibles open on page 1083, as we continue our series of talks looking at John chapters 11 and 12.

And as we've just heard, that reading contains the most extraordinary evening. Here's a middle-class dinner party in Bethany, one of the outlying village suburbs of Jerusalem.

The guests are all seated. Jesus is the guest of honour, and the main course has already been served. Suddenly, the conversation is interrupted.

As a woman gets up, she's carrying a bottle of perfume that's cost her a year's wages, around £20,000. She walks over to Jesus, pours the perfume on his feet, and wipes his feet with her hair. Now, that may be the sort of behaviour that happens at dinner parties north of the river, but it certainly wouldn't happen in Dulwich. It is a picture, isn't it, of the most extraordinary devotion to Jesus.

[3 : 32] And that is the issue for us this morning, is I want us to ask the question, how would you characterise the Christian life? When you get down to basics, what is the Christian life about at its very heart?

Perhaps you're someone looking in on the Christian faith this morning from the outside, so to speak, and you see in Christianity a life of ritual or tradition, a life that is simply out of step with the modern world, or a life of rules and regulations.

Or perhaps you're a Christian here already, as I guess most of us are. Well, how do you see the Christian life? Ticking a box that says, I believe in Jesus. Or just kind of, you find yourself living a particular lifestyle.

Or maybe we say, well, it's all about following Jesus. Well, whoever we are this morning, this passage in John chapter 11 and 12 shows us what is at the very heart of the Christian life, because it shows us what an appropriate response to Jesus looks like.

It is to live a life of extravagant devotion to Jesus Christ. Now, that's been a challenge for me over the last week, as I've been looking at this passage again.

[4 : 45] And you see, for all of us, it begs the question, is a devotion to Jesus, an extravagant love of Jesus, is that the hallmark of my own life?

Now, those who have been following this series will know that in John chapter 11, the whole focus of the chapter has been on Jesus, as he has raised Lazarus, a dead man, dead for four days, as he has raised him from death, raised to life.

And you can see that Lazarus is still in view in this passage we're looking at today. If you look at chapter 12, verses 1 and 2. Six days before the Passover, Jesus, therefore, came to Bethany, where Lazarus was, whom Jesus had raised from the dead.

So they gave a dinner for him there. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those reclining with him at the table. In other words, this is a celebration dinner in Jesus' honour, and we're given two reasons why the Christian life is to be a life of extravagant devotion to Jesus.

You'll see them there on the outline. You'll have to write particularly small today if you want to take notes, but do take notes nonetheless, if that would be helpful. First of all, a life of extravagant devotion to Jesus, out of gratitude that Jesus defeats death.

[6 : 09] Now, immediately in verse 2, here is Lazarus sitting at the table eating the meal. The raising of Lazarus a few days earlier, in other words, is not some optical illusion.

Here is Lazarus, a walking, eating, talking, visual aid of Jesus' power to raise the dead. You'll remember that back in chapter 11, verses 25 and 26, we saw, didn't we, what that power looks like. As Jesus says, verse 25, I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live. And everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die.

Jesus promising there, life with God now for those who believe in him. Life that continues beyond the grave to resurrection life after death.

And Lazarus, therefore, is the great visual aid that when Jesus makes that claim in John chapter 11, he will do exactly what he says he will do.

[7 : 17] Just as Lazarus was raised to physical life in this world, so we can be sure that those who believe in Jesus will be raised to resurrection life in the next.

So then look on to verse 3. 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.

Here is Lazarus' sister Mary pouring out this expensive perfume worth a year's wages in extravagant devotion to Jesus, out of gratitude for the fact that he is the one who defeats death. Now, one of the questions which we always need to ask when we're looking at the Bible is why is it that the writers of the Bible, in this case John's Gospel, record for us these particular events here? After all, John says at the end of his book that if you wrote down everything that Jesus did and everything that Jesus said, why, even the whole world wouldn't have room for the books that could be written.

[8 : 37] So why is it that John bothers to record this particular event at this particular dinner party where we see Mary's response of gratitude to Jesus' death?

Well, surely it is because that is to be our response too. Surely it is because, like Mary, we are to give ourselves to Jesus in extravagant devotion.

A life of extravagant gratitude to Jesus. Her devotion is very challenging, isn't it, in every age in culture, but I suspect particularly in ours, because her devotion is such a public devotion.

She is so unselfconscious in her devotion, which is a challenge in our secular culture, which doesn't do God, and where faith is so often regarded as a private matter.

But as well as being a public devotion, it is also the most wonderfully uninhibited devotion, isn't it?

As she pours out perfume worth a year's wages, £20,000 or so, over Jesus.

[9 : 53] Again, what a challenge in our secular culture to show such uninhibited, extravagant devotion to Jesus Christ.

It is very un-British. This is not sort of ticking a box, declaring what I believe. It's not the formality of going to church once a week or following Jesus within set boundaries, having things in the diary which I know I must do.

This is an uninhibited devotion. to Jesus Christ. Whereas the language of British restraint says don't take your faith too seriously, but that is clearly not authentic Christianity, is it?

Indeed, such a response clearly hasn't grasped that Jesus is the one who defeats death. The only authentic response is a life of extravagant devotion.

The story is told of a wealthy young woman who was very beautiful and who lived in a large mansion.

[11:00] One day her uncle came to visit. He approached the entrance gates of the house which opened automatically and he drove up the driveway towards the house. As he did so, he noticed two men, both helping two men at one of the fences down the side of the driveway.

So he stopped and he said to them, why are you doing that? And he got two very different responses. The first answered, I'm hoping the lady of the house will marry me.

The second response, the lady of the house rescued me from the river last week. You see, I was drowning and she saved my life. And I'm doing this out of gratitude for what she has done.

Well, they're very different responses, aren't they? And the Christian life is not a life of trying to earn God's favour because we cannot earn God's favour. Rather, the Christian life is a life of unreserved, extravagant gratitude to Jesus Christ because he is the one who by his death defeats death.

And therefore, of course, our response to what Mary did at that dinner party shows us our attitude to Jesus' defeat of death.

[12:17] You see, can you see here how Mary is such a deliberate contrast on the one hand to Judas on the other? Have a look at verses 4-6.

But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples, he who 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 charged with the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it. Now, Judas' argument is superficially very powerful, isn't it?

Think of all the poor you could help, the meals you could provide in the night shelter, and so on. But of course, whether we side with Judas or whether we side with Mary shows, doesn't it, our own attitude to Jesus' defeat of death.

Judas portrays the sneering and scoffing that so often comes the way of those who do serve Jesus in this extravagant manner. I think we can so often see the reaction of Judas all around us every time someone gives themselves to Jesus in extravagant service.

[13:38] Such a waste that he spent all his time doing Christian things, or so much of his time doing Christian things at university, and that it lost him that first. Such a shame that she gave up that promising career in the city to work for her local church.

She was part of the material. Such a waste that he got hooked on this Christianity thing, and is no longer willing to put in the long hours, because he could have gone far if he had done.

And those of us with children, why, of course, it's worth asking, isn't it, why, what are our ambitions for our children? Do we pray that they would be devoted to Jesus more than anything else?

A devotion that is public, a devotion that is uninhibited, or at our heart of hearts is our main ambition for them, that they get the right exams, or the right place in the right school, or the right college, and land that plum job.

And then I think it's worth asking ourselves, are we modelling that devotion to our children if we have them? I think it's so easy to fall into the trap as Christian parents to think to ourselves, perhaps when presented with some new initiative, perhaps, that would help proclaim the message of Jesus, to think to ourselves, well, of course, we can't do that because of the children.

[15:04] But actually, what our children need is a model from us of extravagant, costly devotion to Jesus Christ.

That is precisely the thing they need from us. For all of us, we need to ask the question, is the hallmark of my life an unreserved gratitude to Jesus Christ?

First of all, for his defeat of death. But then secondly, out of gratitude for Jesus' own death. Because I wonder what you'd have expected Jesus to say to Judas.

Perhaps something like, come on, Judas, it's not every day that someone's raised from the dead. Lazarus' new life, surely, is worth celebrating. But actually, he says something very different, doesn't he, as he talks about his own burial.

Have a look at verse 7. Jesus said, leave her alone so that she may keep it for the day of my burial. The poor you always have with you, but you will not always have me.

[16 : 11] Now that looks slightly odd, doesn't it? Because if that's the case, we may all think to ourselves, why didn't Mary then wait for the moment when Jesus was killed and use the perfume then? Well, I take it the answer is, and the best explanation is simply that Jesus' death at this point in John chapter 12 is now imminent.

Because the anointing of Jesus here is framed on either side by the plot to kill Jesus. So last week, we saw, didn't we, how the political and religious authorities began plotting to kill Jesus, and John summarizes that for us in chapter 11, verse 57, as we read, now the chief priests and the Pharisees have given orders that if anyone knew where Jesus was, he should let them know so they might arrest him.

And then after the dinner party, which we're looking at this morning, in chapter 12, verses 9 and 10, they're now planning not only to kill Jesus, but to kill Lazarus as well, verse 10, so the chief priests made plans to put Lazarus to death as well.

In other words, Jesus knows that his death is imminent. It's why in verse 8, he says, you will not always have me with you. And what happens next, as we'll see over the next couple of weeks, in verse 12 of chapter 12, he enters Jerusalem by chapter 13, where the very night before Jesus' arrest and betrayal, and then he is arrested and crucified.

In other words, here at this dinner party, we're just days away from the death of Jesus. His death is now imminent. It is entirely appropriate that his body be anointed now for burial.

[17 : 48] Now, of course, Mary doesn't fully realize the implications of what she is saying. Just like last week, we looked at Caiaphas, the high priest, who spoke better than he knew when he predicted that Jesus would die for the people.

So here, Mary acts better than she knows in anointing Jesus for his burial. But nonetheless, Jesus is saying, isn't he, in verses 7 and 8, that her reaction is entirely appropriate because Jesus is about to die.

Now, I wonder how you'd answer Judas' question. What could be more important than giving £20,000 to the poor? The needs of the poor are huge.

They're splashed across our newspapers and our television programs every day. Yet astonishingly, Jesus says, it is a better use of a year's wages to spend the money on him in this lavish, extravagant way than to give the money to the poor.

So we're about to ask, aren't we, why? Why is he so much more important than the poor? Well, it's because he's about to die, verse 7. It's because, as we saw last week, Jesus will die for his people.

[19 : 08] He will die in their place. He will die taking the punishment that we deserve so that on that judgment day, rather than facing hell, we can be certain of heaven.

Resurrection life on the final day. And that is why this celebration party is overshadowed by the death of Jesus on behalf of his people.

You see, the irony is that although Lazarus now lives, that actually Jesus is about to die. and that smell which we thought about two weeks ago of Lazarus decomposing in the grave, why, has been replaced by the smell of this ointment as Jesus is anointed for his burial, his death impending.

You see, John deliberately holds up both Lazarus and Jesus to make the point that yes, Lazarus now has life, but actually it is at the expense of Jesus' death.

And we could go around this room this morning and for each one of us who has put our trust in Jesus, we could say Sarah, Richard, Joe, Matt, whoever it is, has life and will be raised on the final day because of the death of Jesus in their place.

[20 : 31] and therefore Mary is showing us the unique adoration that is due to Jesus because of his death for his people.

You see, you can't separate the fact that Jesus defeats death from the fact that he does so by his death. You can't have Christianity without the cross. The death of Jesus is at the very heart of Christianity.

Christianity. The story is told of the playwright George Bernard Shaw storming out of a meeting one day where the death of Jesus was being explained in very similar terms to the way in which John explains it here and we've been thinking about over the last couple of weeks or so.

As he left the meeting shouting, I will pay my own debts and no doubt he did. As he went on to describe what he did, to write about what he described as crossianity which he saw as an aberration of pure Christianity.

For him a religion that has a Jesus who needs to die on behalf of his people so that he can be forgiven, so that they can be forgiven, who dies in their place was to be despised.

[21 : 47] Well John chapter 11 shows us doesn't it that there is no life with God now without the death of Jesus and that there is no resurrection life with God in heaven without the death of Jesus either.

We must beware of anything that calls itself Christianity which doesn't have the death of Jesus Christ right at the very centre. And those of you who know something of the history of Christianity in this country in the 20th century will know that has frequently been an issue for God's people. So then what does Mary display? Why she displays the extravagant gratitude that is a right response to the death of Jesus in our place? What might such an extravagant devotion to Jesus look like for us?

Well I think of the medical students who's decided to give up a promising career in medicine to go and train to be a missionary out of devotion to Jesus.

Or the man who downsizes his job or retires early to give more time to serving in the local church out of devotion to Jesus. Or the Sunday school teacher or Bible study group leader who sacrificially prepares each week and looks after group members out of devotion to Jesus.

[23 : 06] Or the employee who refuses to allow her employer to be number one, calling the shots, who refuses to be dishonest, who refuses to be economical with the truth, who is known as a Christian in the office, who seeks to invite colleagues to hear lunchtime Bible talks about Jesus.

out of devotion to Jesus. Or the lawyer who refuses to live in the sort of house, in the sort of area, driving the sort of car, enjoying the sort of holidays that his colleagues expect of him at his particular age and stage of life.

Why? So that he can give his money away sacrificially out of devotion to Jesus. Indeed, the week where regulars at Grace Church have received a letter about our church finances over the next year or so.

I guess it's a good question for all of us to ask, isn't it? Do our bank accounts demonstrate an extravagant love for Jesus Christ? Or is he simply getting the small change?

Well, I want to finish by bringing us back to the question we started with. At its heart, what do we think Christianity is all about? life? The authentic Christian life is a life of uninhibited, extravagant devotion to Jesus Christ, a life of gratitude.

[24 : 31] If you're not yet a Christian, is that your understanding of the Christian life? Not a life of rules and regulations, but grasping that Jesus has died in our place so that we can be forgiven, and a life of extravagant gratitude that flows out of that.

If you're a Christian, does that describe your life? Or are you simply going through the motions? It's very easy, isn't it, to do that, simply to kind of go through the motions, especially perhaps when we've been Christians for some time.

And of course, when we go through the motions, we then end up resenting all the demands that we feel are placed upon us. And the remedy is to meditate upon Jesus' death. Why not read through John chapter 11 again?

Why not read through again this account of the raising of Lazarus and see again that Jesus died in your place that you might be forgiven, that you have life with God now and the certain promise of life in the future in heaven.

The assurance of being forgiven on the final day in heaven, not hell. And then having done that, will you decide on the one thing?

[25 : 42] you will do this week out of devotion to Jesus. Let's pray together and then we can have time for questions.

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. heaven. Heavenly Father, thank you for this picture of extravagant devotion to the Lord Jesus Christ.

We thank you that he is the one who defeats death. We praise you for his own death by which death is defeated. And we're sorry, heavenly Father, when our own lives do not demonstrate this extravagant devotion when our lives are cold and formulaic, perhaps even resentful for some of us. And we pray, heavenly Father, that our own lives would indeed demonstrate this extravagant devotion to Jesus. And we ask it for his name's sake.

[27 : 05] Amen.