

Dying with Jesus: Prepare to Die

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[0 : 00] Good evening folks, lovely to have you here. We are in John chapter 12. Let me give you 30 seconds to orientate you where this particular chapter fits into the whole book of John's Gospel.

And it's basically, it's the hinge. So you have chapters 1 to 11, lots of signs and wonders, you remember those from last year. And the climactic sign is the raising of Lazarus from the dead.

The book sort of builds up to that, which makes sense because it's the ultimate picture of what Jesus has come to do, which is bring life where there was death.

So that's chapters 1 to 11. And then we have chapters 13 to 20, which is the journey to the cross because the giving of life comes at a cost and the cost is Christ's death.

So we're in chapter 12 and what that is, is it's like a hinge. It's a pivot point, right? It's a pivot point. It's right here. And it looks back to what's happened. It looks forwards to what's coming up.

[1 : 01] And what do we find here at this point of pivot in John's Gospel? Right. Here's what we've got. We've got Lazarus. This is Christ's star witness at the moment.

We've got Lazarus and he's all out and about being all alive and quite impressive on that front, on the living front. And this is causing a lot of excitement, obviously.

You've got verses 11 and 17 indicate that people are coming to faith. They're coming to Jesus because, you know, dead man walking, right? Fantastic stuff. The Pharisees are pretty panicky about this, though.

And see in verse 19 there, the Pharisees look to one another and they go, look, the whole world is going after Jesus. We have to stop this. And then earlier they say, we're going to kill Jesus as well, which is just straight there.

There's this remarkable contrast, isn't there, between the business that they're in and the business of Jesus. And there's tons to say about that, but I want to focus on something else this morning.

[2 : 02] I want to zoom in on just one or two verses and spend our time looking at the remarkable thing that Mary does.

So let's do that. Let's look at that. So the scene is this. We are in the very happy household of Mary and Martha and Lazarus.

We're in a town called Bethany. It's a few miles out of Jerusalem. Jesus has turned up and so they throw a dinner party, presumably in honor of Christ, which makes sense. And in the middle of all this polite conversation going on, something amazing happens.

Verse three happens. Mary, therefore, took a pound of expensive ointment made from pure nard and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped his feet with a hair. Now we can hear that and we can go, that's quite unusual.

But what a lovely thing to do. What a special thing to do. What a nice thing to do. In the culture of the day, it was a heck of a lot more than just a really, really nice thing.

[3 : 07] It was a shocking thing. A really shocking thing. It was, it was, there were three shocking aspects to it.

We're going to look at those three aspects because I want to do that. It's what I want to spend the time in the sermon on because I look at this and I just go, this is just, this scene here, this is a microcosm of what devotion to Jesus looks like.

It's what real faith looks like. When your life has been so impacted by Jesus, like Mary's was, this is how you respond. So three words, three words to describe her devotion, her faith or her response to Jesus.

Three words. They are one, unconditional. Two, death. And three, scandalous. So we'll look at them one by one. That's the basic, that's the basic sermon right there.

Okay. So one, her faith was unconditional. Her response to Jesus was unconditional. Her devotion was unconditional. Back in the ancient Near East, people would come over for dinner and it wouldn't have been unusual for the host to dab a little bit of like, you know, Chanel number five on the head of the people coming over.

[4 : 19] There you go, there you go, there you go. This was, you know, before the days of deodorant and regular bathing and it was, it was just smelly times, right?

Stinky smelly times. And it was a nice thing to do to kind of just make it smell a little bit nicer, a little bit nicer. This is not what Mary did. Mary broke open a whole jar of perfume and used the entire thing on Jesus' feet.

And this is not any old jar of perfume. This is ridiculously expensive perfume. It was perfume that was made in India from a specific root, so it had to be imported.

Judas, who knew a thing about money it would seem, priced this perfume out at 300 denarii. Now we know that the living wage, from the New Testament, the living wage for a daily labourer was one denarii.

So we're talking about perfume here that is worth the annual wage of a day labourer. That is some pretty fancy eau de toilette. It's French.

[5 : 24] It's French. Don't worry about it. Now, you might ask yourself, what was Mary doing with like a \$30,000 bottle of perfume?

It's a good question. Was she fabulously wealthy? There's nothing else that indicates she's fabulously wealthy. It's much more likely that, it's much more likely, this is probably just the most expensive thing she owns.

It's, this perfume is probably the family nest egg. It's like the family heirloom. Maybe it's been passed down. And it's kept in case of like economic collapse, or somebody dies, or there's a job loss, or there's a famine, whatever.

Whatever. Something happens, and they have no income, well, they've got this one thing. They've got the family treasure, and they can sell that, and they'll be good for a year. They can ride stuff.

They can ride this out. But Mary didn't hang on to it, this family treasure. She didn't keep it for a rainy day. She anointed the feet of Christ to a fit. And from the outside, people would have said, and perhaps you think this, people would have said, look at that.

[6 : 34] Mary just blew her family's financial security. Right there, you can see, it's just dribbling along the floor. It's just gone. Well, clearly Mary didn't see it this way. She just wanted to express her devotion to Christ.

What does this tell us about following Jesus? What does this tell us about faith? What does this tell us about devotion to Christ? Well, it tells us this. The example Mary gives is that it's unconditional.

She didn't say, well, I'll follow you, Jesus, as long as it doesn't impact my finances. And I'll follow you, Jesus, as long as it doesn't eat into my leisure time. And I'll follow you, Jesus, as long as it doesn't make me look stupid.

You guys know, I'm sure you know about the real estate market in Vancouver, right? Like it's absolutely mad. Like it's completely mad. And a friend of mine bought a house recently.

And they've been trying for a long time to buy a home. And they said this. They said the market is so bonkers right now that when you make an offer on a home, if you want to have any chance of getting that home, you cannot have any subject conditions.

[7 : 54] So a subject condition is like you make an offer and you say, but it's subject to an inspection on the house. Or it's subject to my finances.

Or it's subject to my house selling. Basically, you just, you can't include anything like that now. You have to be all in no matter what you're getting yourself into.

Now that is terrible for a buyer in Vancouver. But it's actually what it looks like to follow Jesus. You are all in. You are all in no subject conditions.

It's the only way it actually works. That's Mary's response. All in no subject conditions. Now compare that to the response of Lazarus. He's like, look, look, look.

Oh, come on. We could have sold that. Given the money to the poor. Which is a fiction. He was faking concern for the poor to mask his own greed. He was a thief.

[8 : 49] His life revolved around money. For him, that was the primary good. So what a contrast there. You've got Judas who's clinging to his life because his life was validated by money.

And you've got Mary who values Jesus well above her own financial security. Mary's devotion to Jesus was unconditional.

Now a side note. This text is not advocating financial irresponsibility. If you're a poor steward of your money, you answer to God for that fact.

That's sinful. What it is, it is a picture of a woman who was so taken by the beauty of Jesus that everything else pales in comparison to her.

So she had no qualms about breaking out her family treasure and using it to anoint the feet of Jesus. The next shocking aspect about Mary's devotion.

[9 : 51] So one, it was unconditional. Two, it was a death. It looked like death. It was a death to self. Mary just wanted to serve Jesus.

Her desire for a whole life is captured in that moment of serving Jesus. This is ultimate PDA. This is the ultimate stunning display of public affection.

Now to understand what I mean by death here, it's helpful to have some background. Because it was outrageous what she did. So much of the slavery, a good chunk of the slavery in the ancient Near East, didn't look like the awful slavery of the last few hundred years.

Because you had lots of instances of Jewish people who would get themselves into debt. So they would sell themselves into slavery to pay off the debt.

And at the end of that period, they were free again. And there were rules around how you treated slaves. For example, foot washing was an exceptionally demeaning thing to do.

[10 : 59] So one of the rules was, you could not ask a Jewish servant to deal with feet or shoes. That was beneath even a slave. And so what have you got here?

You've got Mary, the host of a party, was doing something. Not even slaves were expected to do this. So what does this tell us about what devotion to Christ looks like?

Mary is saying this. She is saying, I give up my right, or I give up the right not to deal with feet.

In other words, I give up my rights to self-determination. The staff read a book recently called *The Praying Life*. And it's a book about prayer.

It's quite autobiographical. Let me read just one sentence from that. The guy says this. He says, the great struggle of my life is not trying to discern God's will.

[11 : 59] It's trying to discern and then disown my own. Once I see that, then prayer flows. I have to be praying because I'm no longer in charge. Because of what Jesus had done for Mary, her attitude is this.

I'll serve you no matter what the task is. There's nothing beneath me when it comes to serving you. My life is yours. Our hearts are very slippery things, though, aren't they?

Let me tell you a quick story. I became a Christian at 17-ish. And I started going to a church that met at a primary school. It was a small church. And me and a mate of mine would go like 45 minutes or an hour early to church.

And there was a stage like this. And then there was this cavernous kind of area under the stage. So we'd climb down there. And we'd just get there early and pull all the chairs out. Stack all the chairs, pull the chairs out, stack them down at the end of the service.

And during the service, I was in charge of the overhead projector. And I could not believe they let me do this stuff. Like, I'm the chair guy. They let me do the chairs.

[13 : 07] And they let me do the overhead projector. I remember about five years later, vividly writing in this little diary thing.

There was some event that I really wanted to emcee it. And they didn't let me do it. And I wrote in my diary, I can't believe they didn't let me emcee this event. There was so much around here.

Now, I don't quite know what happened over that five-year period. But something happened where I went from this kid who was just delighted to do anything. I couldn't believe they let me do stuff.

To being really put out when they wouldn't give me some sort of platform or something. I think that five-year period from late teens to early 20s was a period of, you know, you're kind of at university and getting your first jobs.

And you're sort of marinating in upward mobility. And you start to develop a sense of entitlement about how you think your life should look.

[14 : 12] Anyway, it wasn't great. I was thinking the other day about my life and my future. And I was thinking about, I'm just going to talk about this in a slightly different way.

And I was thinking about godly goal setting. And I thought, I should do a Google. I'm going to do a Google and Google godly goal setting. No, I was going to Google god and goal setting.

I thought, there might be some cool stuff out there. And of course, it's terrible stuff. Because it was mostly, like, honestly, like every single entry. It's like, you know, three billion hits and stuff.

Every single one is how to reach your goals using God. You know, the picture of Mary serving Christ in such a humbling way, it just says the opposite of that, doesn't it?

It just says the opposite of that. It's like, I'm here to serve God, not to maximize my pleasure or my fulfillment in my life. But our modern sort of Western culture, right, we so have this tendency to want to co-opt God for our purposes.

[15 : 16] And it's such a mistake. And it's so problematic. And you might be wondering, is that me? Is that me? Is that what's going on in my heart? Well, I can give you the test to see if it is going on in your heart.

And the test is quite simple. It's how do you know whether you're shifted from a place of wanting to serve God to a place of sort of entitlement. Is if basically in your life, if you're not getting your way, when maybe you pray for something, if you get angry with God, because something didn't work out the way you think it should have worked out, in most cases, you've made that shift.

I hope we come to this image of Mary cleaning the feet of Christ, and that kind of dispels that kind of attitude. I hope it does for me.

Something that might be helpful to you is a question. So I'll ask you another question. It's kind of a harsh question, but I think it's a good one. The question is this. Am I using God to get to my goals or letting God use me to achieve his goals?

This idea of co-opting God to get what I want, this is not a new thing, of course. It's not like a modern Western thing. Have a look at the triumphal entry there in verses 12 to 14. So Jesus is coming into Jerusalem.

[16 : 43] The crowds come out to meet him, and they shout really good things, but the detail of laying down these palm leaves, it throws a bit of shade on these good words. I'll tell you why.

During the Revolutionary Wars, the Jews were sort of rebelling against Rome. The Jews would inscribe palm trees on their coins. So the palm tree was the symbol of revolution.

So this crowd that gathered was most likely a pretty nationalistic crowd, and they saw Jesus as someone who could fulfill their goals of independence.

And Jesus knew this, which is why he demilitarizes their expectations by riding in, not on a war horse like a general would, but riding on a donkey.

See, this crowd, they wanted something from Jesus, and Jesus wasn't going to give it to them, which is why a week later, some of the people who shouted, Hosanna! were probably shouting, Crucify him.

[17 : 42] So let me ask you the question again. Am I using God to get my goals, or am I letting God use me to achieve his goals? Where are we in the sermon?

Devotion to Jesus. Following Jesus. Real faith. What does it look like? One, it's unconditional. Two, it looks like death. It looks like death to self. It looks like serving him and not yourself.

And lastly, following Jesus is scandalous. Now, what was scandalous about what Mary did? Well, to wash feet back in the days, you would normally use water and a towel. Mary uses perfume.

And what? Her hair. Now, letting down your hair back in the days, this was a very intimate thing to do. In that culture, a woman would only let down their hair when they were at home, often only in the presence of a husband or family that they really, really trusted.

Apparently, letting down your hair in public was grounds for divorce because it was such, like it said, it was such a shameful thing to do because it was this really quite intimate, super intimate thing.

[18 : 46] But Mary had given her heart to Jesus. That's why she did it. And when that's happened in your life, you seem, you just, you were less concerned about what people think of you and you're less concerned about how others look to you.

How you think about what others think of you. You know, what Christians think and believe in a city like Vancouver, how we act, I mean, it can seem quite scandalous. It can seem very out of step with culture, like Mary's act was.

I mean, why spend, you know, hours a week working on a Bible study or befriending the, sort of the, the different person at work or the difficult person at work knowing that that's, will impact your social status?

Why prioritise a church gathering over a social one? Why talk openly about your faith when you know it'll make you look a bit silly or foolish? Why do that? You do that because Jesus has captured your heart.

He's captured your affections. This is the story of Mary. It's wonderful. Mary, here is a woman whose love knew no shame. She was all in.

[19 : 54] All in with her heart. And I think this last piece of this little triplet here is incredibly important. A reminder, we've talked about unconditional giving, we've talked about a life of service and scandalous love is the last one here.

And this is so important because it's, it's actually possible to have the first two and not the last one. You can say, God, I give you my perfume, i.e., I give you my nice things. My resources are available to you.

And you can say, I'll serve you. I'll do the things that other people don't want to do. You can do both of those things and not give your heart to Jesus completely and fully. How did Mary get to this place where her heart belonged to Christ so freely that she was not worried about what people would think of her?

How did that happen? Well, it is very, very interesting to note this. That this particular Mary, there's a number of Marys in the New Testament, this particular Mary, Mary of Bethany, is only mentioned three times in the New Testament.

And every time she is mentioned, you see her at Jesus' feet. I'll give you all three references. Luke 10, Jesus visits the family and says, and it says, Mary sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his teaching.

[21 : 22] John 11, Mary came to where Jesus was and saw him. She fell at his feet. And John 12, here we are today. She anointed his feet. Where is the place that the affections of our heart are converted?

It's at the feet of Jesus. She heard his words. She saw him bring life where there was death. His love awakened her love. She stared into the beauty of what Jesus had said and done and she was changed.

She was transformed actually into the likeness of Christ. She poured out her life for him as he is pouring out his life for her.

Mary of Bethany, what a remarkable woman. So you want to change your life? You want to move to this place where you're not living with a sense of entitlement? You want to be bold but humble? You want to love without shame?

You want to know that? Be like her. Sit at the feet of Jesus. Sit at the feet of Jesus. Commit yourself to Christ unconditionally.

[22 : 29] Die for him. All of those small deaths that we have to do every day and love him scandalously without shame. And your heart, it will be changed. It will be changed as you continue to understand what he's done for you.

Amen.