

Marvel: What Did Jesus Do?

Anointed by Mary

John 11:45-12:11

Mark Vroegop

“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. 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, 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 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 who was about to betray him), said, “Why was this ointment not sold for three hundred 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 moneybag 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 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” (John 11:45–12:11, ESV).

Zac Hicks, in his book on worship, makes a helpful and thought-provoking statement:

“The enemy hates the worship of God more than anything else...worship prophesies to the world ‘You will be made new, but you first must die’...All this is because the flesh doesn’t just stumble into sin; it

worships its way into sin. The lust of the flesh is the fruit of idolatrous adoration, and the call of worship is a summons away from fleshly addictions to idols.”¹

You could summarize what Hicks says with a simple phrase: worship is war.²

Worship Battle

Do you understand what that means? There is a continual battle waging for the affections of your heart and the obedience of your life. Part of the reason that believers gather on the Lord’s day is to stoke the embers of your mind and heart so that you will effectively wage the worship-war and find yourself more in love with Jesus.

The entire mission of our church centers on this focal point. We strive to ignite a passion to follow Jesus. Gathering, singing, praying, giving, listening, and responding to the Word of God are all a part of that mission.

If you are not a Christian, I think it would be helpful for you to know what is happening here. In part, I want you to understand why the church gathers on Sunday, but I also want you to appreciate something more. Life is a battle for what we are going to worship.

That’s true at two levels. For a non-Christian, it relates to the question of who or what is primary in his or her life. It’s connected to the enormously important question of who are we, what is the purpose of life, what happens to us when we die, who is Jesus, and what do we really love?

For the Christian, there are still remnants of that battle. To be a Christian means that you have determined “God is holy, I am not, Jesus saves, and Christ is my life.” The issue of allegiance has been settled, but there is still an insurgency battle that takes place in the heart. It’s not the same struggle that a non-Christian experiences, but it is a battle.

In the Gospel of John, that battle is directly connected to what it means to believe. Throughout this book, John identifies the inflection point between those who believe and those who don’t. And our text today helps us to see three different examples. We see the religious leaders choose power and position over Jesus. We see Mary choose humility and generosity. And we see Judas choose greed and hypocrisy.

Today we are going to look at the text and see three paths. Two are disastrous and they lead to the crucifixion of Jesus. One is commendable, and it leads to true and acceptable worship.

¹ Zac Hicks, *The Worship Pastor: A Call to Ministry for Worship Leaders and Teams*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), Kindle Edition, 80-83.

² Ibid.

Path 1: Prideful Power

The raising of Lazarus sent shockwaves through the Jewish community. You can imagine why. There is no more powerful foe of mankind than death. And if Jesus of Nazareth truly has the power to raise people from the dead, it affirms his claim of being the Son of God and it will make him unstoppable.

Verses 45-46 tell us that at the raising of Lazarus, many believed in Jesus. However, there were others who not only didn't believe in Jesus, but also reported what happened to the Pharisees. And that report sets in motion a series of spiritual and political meetings.

To understand the full picture here, you need to know something about how Israel was governed. The ruling body was called the Sanhedrin. In verse 47 it is called "the council." It was comprised of seventy members drawn from leading priestly families, religious instructors, and elders.³ The Pharisees were the religious instructors or the scribes. They were experts on the law and closely connected to the people. The elders were landed aristocrats (think "Downton Abby") and the priests were related to the family of the high priest. Most of them were Sadducees.

Now, the Jewish nation was a Roman-occupied territory. And Rome allowed some semblance of self-rule. The Sanhedrin possessed both judicial and legislative power. The high priest served in an executive leadership role. Eventually, this will be the body that will put Jesus on trial and forward the case to Pilate for crucifixion.

But for context, it's important for you to know the nature of this group of leaders. The Sanhedrin was the center of political and theological power.

With that in mind, we read 11:47 differently. The council is gathered, and they feel the pressure that Jesus is creating. People are following him. His teaching is attracting support. But the signs that he performs are challenging their authority because people are starting to consider if he is the Messiah. They already faced embarrassment when they were confronted by the man Jesus healed of blindness in chapter nine. But raising a person from the dead was an entirely different matter.

Verse 48 is key: *"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."*

Notice what they are not concerned about—they do not stop to consider if Jesus really is the Messiah. They do not investigate the raising of Lazarus from the dead. They don't evaluate his teaching. Why? Because they are only interested in preserving their power.

What are they worried about? The Jewish leaders are concerned that Jesus's popularity will create some kind of uprising. Rome was particularly sensitive to any kind of unrest that challenged the peace of the empire or any splinter group that challenged the authority of Rome.

³ Allen C. Myers, [*The Eerdmans Bible Dictionary*](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987), 912.

Keep this in mind because that was the argument the chief priests used with Pilate in John 19 when they said, “We have no king but Caesar” (John 19:15).

When the Sanhedrin says “take away our place and our nation,” it is reflective of both the group’s position and its love of the nation which gave it that position. The roots of the Sanhedrin’s nationalism are embedded in its members’ affection for their positions. They love their power, and it is hidden in their love of their nation and keeping things the way they are.

They don’t realize or they don’t want to realize how far that nation has wandered. It’s why Jesus overturns the money-changing tables in John 2. It’s why his teaching is constantly at odds with the Pharisees who set up additional rules and interpretations that gave them prideful positions.

The pride of these leaders blinded them to who Jesus really was.

The high priest, Caiaphas, speaks up. You can hear the arrogance and desperation in his words. After telling the council that they understand nothing at all (v. 49), he suggests that Jesus needs to be killed. But he doesn’t say it that directly. He makes it sound commendable and wise—like the serpent sounded in Garden of Eden. “...It is better for you that one man should die for the people, not that the whole nation should perish” (v. 50). Notice how “other-centered” his words sound!

This is what the prideful clutching of power does. It rationalizes. It spiritualizes. It philosophizes. But he’s just suggested the plot that will lead to the crucifixion of Jesus.

To make that point clear, John tells us that Caiaphas’s words were prophetic (vv. 51-52). And also take note that God is sovereign over the wicked schemes of mankind. God used the blindness and the sinfulness of the Jewish leaders to save “the children of God” (v. 52).

And from that day forward, the clock was ticking for Jesus (vv. 53-57). The leaders were not about to give up their prideful power.

Do you feel or sense any level of connection to the dynamics in play here? In order to come to Jesus, you must be willing to admit that you are a sinner. You have to end the comparison game. And you must be willing to publicly confess that Jesus is your savior. That’s why baptism is important. It is the official means by which you go “on the record” as a follower of Jesus.

But this public declaration also important after you become a Christian. For some of you, it relates to speaking up about your faith at a family gathering, at your sorority, or in a conversation at work. You have to battle what it might mean for your reputation or your career. If the Lord puts you in a position of influence in business, in education, in politics, or some other sphere, you will have to make some hard choices. You’ll have to wrestle with the line of whether you are faithfully following Jesus or whether you are simply trying to “get ahead” or protect your position.

Those who wish to pridefully preserve their position are on the wrong side when it comes to Jesus.

Path 2: Humble Generosity

The scene shifts from the halls of power and political intrigue to a dinner party in a home in Bethany, six days before Passover. According to verse one, this is the home of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus.

Apparently, they threw a party for Jesus. You could imagine what a great celebration it must have been since Lazarus was there. Verse 2 says that he was reclining at the table.

At some point in the evening, Mary took a pound of ointment with which she anointed Jesus' feet. This oil may have been part of the family's inheritance or was reserved for a future burial. Bodies were anointed with fragrant oils as a part of the embalming process. It's estimated that this oil was worth a year's wages for a common laborer. It was an expensive and special ointment, probably from India. This was a very costly act.

John records that Mary anointed the feet of Jesus and began wiping his feet with her hair. It's a touching moment. During those days, touching someone's feet or washing the feet of another was typically limited to servants or slaves. It was the kind of work considered demeaning. Yet Mary embraces the act of submission and service.

Mary not only touches the feet of Jesus. She also let down her hair and began wiping his feet. It was a humbling act of honor, respect, and worship. According to verse 3, the entire room filled with the fragrance of the perfume.

This act of devotion in the middle of a dinner was filled with humble generosity that pictured more than what Mary even realized. She is merely in awe of who Jesus is. Remember, it was Mary who confronted Jesus at the tomb of Lazarus. She said, "Lord if you had been here, my brother would not have died" (John 11:32). Perhaps she is now overwhelmed with gratitude for what Jesus has done.

What's remarkable here is Mary's lack of concern for herself because of how much she loves Jesus. She isn't worried about taking the posture of a servant and touching Jesus's feet. She's not concerned about the social implications of letting down her hair in public and wiping his feet with her hair. Nor is she worried about the extravagance of the ointment that she is using to anoint Jesus.

Mary has lost sight of herself because of her affection for Jesus. She is humble. I've found Tim Keller's definition of humility helpful: "...the essence of gospel-humility is not thinking more of myself or thinking less of myself, it is thinking of myself less."⁴ Mary thinks so highly of Jesus, that everything else takes second place.

And this perspective also leads to incredible generosity on her part. The expensive ointment is poured out on Jesus because she treasures him more than the symbolic value or the actual value of the ointment. It reminds me of what Paul said in 2 Corinthians 8:9—"*For you know the grace of our Lord*

⁴ <https://www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/19163471-the-freedom-of-self-forgetfulness-the-path-to-true-christian-joy>

Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich” (2 Cor. 8:9).

Mary came face-to-face with the generosity of Jesus. No earthly possession was worth more to her than him. And while the Pharisees and the religious leaders missed who Jesus really was, Mary “got it.” She worshipped Jesus and the room was full of the fragrance.

I wonder if that is how you feel about Jesus today? Are you in awe of him? Do you love him? Do you worship him? What do your speech, actions, and generosity say about what you think about him?

Mary doesn’t care about the cost, culture, or the opinions of others. Mary knows one thing: “I love Jesus.”

It’s a beautiful moment. But it doesn’t last long.

Path 3: Hypocritical Greed

John introduces another tragic thread that we will follow all the way to the crucifixion of Jesus. We learn in 12:4 that Judas takes issue with Mary’s actions and her gift.

The wording here is surely intentional. Judas is identified as “one of his disciples” and “he who was about to betray him” (v. 5). John wants us to see this moment and what follows as a part of a broader tragedy.

Judas rebukes Mary. Whether he said it publicly or whispered it privately, I’m not sure. But here’s what he said, “Why was this ointment not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?” (v. 5). Judas couches his concern with religious language. He watched the anointing of Jesus by Mary. Instead of marveling at her sacrifice and affirming the worth of Jesus, he finds a spiritualized reason to criticize her. He references the poor.

But John makes it clear what is really going on. Just consider if verse 6 was written about your heart when your religious-sounding words were hiding an ulterior motive. John tells us that Judas’s real motivation was greed. He goes so far as to call him a thief, helping himself to what is in the bag.

Judas is using religious-sounding concern to mask his true motivation: a greedy heart.

The tragedy of the moment for Judas is common to the brokenness of our humanity. According to Colossians 3:5, covetousness is actually a form of idolatry. We see it here in full display with Judas. He misses what Mary is doing for Jesus because he loves what the money associated with the ointment could do for him. He chooses himself over Jesus. His greed is just evidence that this is happening in his heart. Eventually, it will lead to the betrayal of Jesus for thirty pieces of silver.

Jesus rebukes Judas in verses 7-8. He takes the actions of Mary with significance beyond what she even knew. Jesus pointed out that this would be connected to his burial in the future. And he boldly identified that Mary’s act of worship was commendable even when considering the needs of the poor.

And so, we see the tragic irony of Judas's words. He hides his greed behind religious sounding words. But the real issue is a heart set on worshipping the wrong thing.

Our text ends with a sense that more is to come. Crowds are gathering—to see both Jesus and Lazarus. The priests determine to put Lazarus to death as well. And yet God's plan is unthwarted. People are still believing in Jesus.

Which Path?

Could I ask you to consider which path you are on today? When it comes to the affections of your heart and the inclinations of your soul: where are you?

If you are a person who has never trusted Christ, would you consider what stands in your way? Perhaps you refuse to acknowledge that you have deeply-rooted spiritual needs. Maybe you are concerned with what people would think if you became a Christian. Perhaps the actions of Mary seem odd—or even foolish to you. Jesus bids people to come to him. But they must come broken, trusting not in themselves, in their position, or their success. In fact, the great tragedy in the New Testament is that often the most successful people missed Jesus because they didn't see their need. Don't let that be you.

Christian, let me speak to you. How far removed are you from the example of Mary? When was the last time that you were moved by the beauty and grace of Christ? When was the last time following Jesus proved costly but worth it for you?

After you come to faith in Christ, you must still be wary of the path of power and greed. These two ditches must be carefully avoided. The gravitational pull of our culture is so strong. Power and greed are the core ingredients of what is wrong with the world. They are what led to the betrayal of Jesus and his crucifixion.

How do you avoid them? By knowing they exist. But also by ensuring that your heart is regularly captivated by Jesus. We must wage warfare against power and greed by worshipping Jesus.

Worship is war!

© College Park Church

Permissions: You are permitted and encouraged to reproduce this material in any format provided that you do not alter the content in any way and do not charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction. Please include the following statement on any distributed copy: by Mark Vroegop.

© College Park Church - Indianapolis, Indiana. www.yourchurch.com