

John 12:1-11

Van Parunak

“He came unto his own place, and his own people received him not.” Jerusalem is distinctively the Lord's city, where he ought to be recognized and received—but the religious leaders there reject him. Isaiah's prophecy has been fulfilled (1:21): “How is the faithful city become an harlot! it was full of judgment; righteousness lodged in it; but now murderers.”

But God always has his remnant, and in unlikely places. “As many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God.” This chapter shows us three examples of those who did receive the Lord:

- The family at Bethany
- The multitudes who had come to Jerusalem from other places, as the Lord enters the city on Palm Sunday
- In particular, the Greeks, anticipating the “other sheep” whom the Lord has promised to draw into “one flock”

1-8, The Anointing at Bethany

John has showed us the corruption in the city that should have received the Lord. Now he shifts our attention out of Jerusalem, to the village of Bethany on the eastern slopes of the Mount of Olives. In contrast to the superficial, hypocritical worship underway in the lavish temple ceremonies, he wants us to see a simple but profound act of worship by one of those who did receive him.

There are four accounts in the gospels when a woman anoints the Lord with precious ointment at a meal, and incurs the criticism of those present, one in each gospel. Three of them describe the event of which we read here, near Jerusalem during passion week. The fourth, in Luke, occurs some time earlier and far to the north, in Galilee, but it has a strong relationship with the history in John.

Relation between the four accounts

See Mayor, HDB III 279ff, for full discussion.

	<i>Luke 7:36-50</i>	<i>John 12:1-8</i>	<i>Matt 26:6-13</i>	<i>Mark 14:3-9</i>
Time	Before passion week	Six days before passover	(passion week)	(passion week) ¹
Place	Galilee—cf. Nain in v. 11	Bethany	Bethany, house of Simon	Bethany, house of Simon
Woman	A woman ... which was a sinner	Mary	A woman	A woman
Description of ointment	Alabaster box Ointment	Pound Ointment of spikenard	Alabaster box Ointment	Alabaster box Ointment of spikenard

¹ v. 1 specifies “two days before passover,” but this is dating the plotting of the Sanhedrin, to which is linked Judas' antagonism (v. 10). The story of the anointing is apparently inserted here to help explain that antagonism.

	Luke 7:36-50	John 12:1-8	Matt 26:6-13	Mark 14:3-9
		Very costly	Precious	Very precious
Target ²	Feet	Feet	Head, Body	Head, Body
Implements	Hair, Tears	Hair		
Objector	Host (Simon the Pharisee)	Judas	His disciples	Some at the table
Objection	She is a sinner	Sell ointment & give to the poor	Sell ointment & give to the poor	Sell ointment & give to the poor

An anointing in Bethany in passion week

John, Matthew, and Mark describe the same event

- In Bethany
- During Passion week
- Same complaint and answer

Differences:

- Head (Matt, Mark) vs. feet (John)? In fact, his whole body was anointed
- Six days (John) vs. two days (Mark)?

Neither time reference directly dates the supper.

- John is dating his arrival in Bethany, on his way up from Jericho; cf. Mark 11:1.
- Mark is dating the planning of his adversaries.

More critical is that in John the supper is placed before the triumphal entry (note especially 12:12 “on the next day”), while in Matt and Mark it follows it.

The account must be out of temporal order in one or the other.

- Calvin accepts the order of the Synoptics, but John 12:12 is difficult to get around.
- It is better to see (with Hendriksen) the story of the anointing inserted later in the synoptics to flesh out the Psalm 41 dichotomy (see my notes on Mark).

An earlier anointing in Galilee

Luke's account is much earlier, and situated in Galilee, before the Lord comes to Jerusalem.

We are not told where the city (Luke 7:37) is, but in 7:1 he was in Capernaum, his headquarters, and the next day (11) he was at Nain (on the north side of the hill of Moreh, just south of Mount Tabor and Nazareth). The next location named is 8:22, on the sea of Galilee. He has been shuttling back and forth, and Magdala lay on the road between Nain and Capernaum.

The theme of Luke's account is the woman's consciousness of being forgiven of a great sin.

² Matt 26:12; Mark 14:8 denote his “body”

The same woman in both

Mary is known to the church (11:2) as “Mary, the one who anointed the Lord with ointment, and wiped his feet with her hair.” It would be very unusual if there were two women who had both done this.

In particular,

- “That” is in italics. John intends to *identify* Mary as “the one who anointed the Lord...”, not to *distinguish* her from other Marys. (Otherwise there would be an article before *mariam*—see other examples in biblical Greek, e.g., Acts 1:11; 7:37; 15:37.)
- The past tense suggests that the anointing has already happened. The reference to Judas during the gospels as the one who “betrayed” the Lord (Matt 10:4, aorist) is sometimes cited against this, but in John, Judas is always described as “the one who should betray him” (6:64, 71; 12:4).
- The two anointings share distinctive features that it would be unusual to find repeated:
 - The use of the hair: It was considered utterly disgraceful for a woman (at least, a married woman) to let down her hair in the presence of men, and some rabbis even considered it a grounds for divorce (see Wenham's notes for authorities).
 - The anointing of the feet: usually one anointed only the head.

And if the woman in Luke is named Mary, it is likely that we are to identify Mary of Bethany with Mary Magdalene.

- The only place we find Mary Magdalene named, other than at the cross and the tomb, is Luke 8:2, among the supporters of the Lord, right after the first anointing.
- Given the devotion of Mary of Bethany for the Lord, it would be amazing if she did *not* come to the cross and the tomb, yet she is not otherwise named there. If she is there, she must be Mary Magdalene, called by that name to distinguish her from the other Mary's who were there.

Synopsis

So we can reconstruct the history more or less along these lines:

- Mary's family home was in Bethany, a short distance from Jerusalem. She was one of at least three children. Her brother was Lazarus and her sister was Martha. The family was well-to-do. They had a cave sepulchre with a rolling stone, and she had “substance” (Luke 8:2) out of which to support the Lord. She appears to be the youngest, and may have rebelled against the restricted environment in which she lived.
- She left Bethany and lived for a while in Magdala, from which she was later called “Mary Magdalene.” Magdala (<http://www.ourfatherlutheran.net/biblehomelands/galilee/magdala.htm>) was a town on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee, population about 40k at the time of the Jewish revolt (Josephus), whose industry was fishing and fish processing, flax weaving and dyeing. We do not know why she went there, but it is tempting to compare her story with the story of the prodigal son in Luke 15:11ff. Being of a rebellious and independent spirit, like the son (15:13), she “took [her] journey into a far country, and there wasted [her] substance with riotous living.” In fact, Mary's subsequent association with the Lord (Luke 8:2) may have suggested this story to him! It's not impossible that the elder brother in the parable may reflect the condescending attitude of Martha toward Mary after Mary returned home.

- When his resources ran out, the prodigal son was reduced to feeding swine, a disgraceful occupation for a Jew. As a woman, Mary appears also to have greatly debased her self, perhaps more from a libertine spirit than due to poverty, for she could still afford a flask of expensive perfume. Her debauchery was enhanced by her surrender to demons, under “the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience” (Eph 2:2). (People in the first century understood, better than we do now, the close link between sin and Satan's angels. Compare the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs (<http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/patriarchs-charles.html>), Reuben, 2-3, “Seven spirits therefore are appointed against man, and they are the leaders in the works of youth. ... First, the spirit of fornication,” then insatiableness, fighting, obsequiousness and chicanery, pride, lying, and injustice.
- Hope came for her when she heard Jesus preaching throughout Galilee. Note in Luke 7:

29 all the people that heard *him*, and the publicans, justified God, being baptized with the baptism of John.

When he healed the son of the widow of Nain (7:16-17), there came a fear on all: and they glorified God, saying, That a great prophet is risen up among us; and, That God hath visited his people. And this rumour of him went forth throughout all Judaea, and throughout all the region round about.”
- She, like the other people (7:16, 20) came to recognize him as “a great prophet” (7:16), “he that should come” (7:20), She is among those from whom the Lord cast out demons (8:2), and resolves to obey his message to “repent” (Luke 13:3,5).
- In the initial thrill of salvation, sometimes we are so preoccupied with the joy of forgiveness that we overlook the one who has delivered us. Like the lepers of Luke 17:12, she at first goes away, rejoicing in her deliverance. But like the one leper (17:15), she is later overcome with the need to express her gratitude to the Lord, and seeks him out. She learns that he is at the home of Simon the Pharisee (perhaps in Magdala), and resolves to come and make her allegiance known to him by anointing him with a precious perfume—perhaps something left over from her ungodly occupation. Overcome with emotion, she soaks his feet with her tears, then wipes them with her hair and ends up anointing them as well.
- Assured of his forgiveness, she attaches herself for a while to the band of disciples (8:1-3), before returning to her family home in the company of the Lord (on one of his visits to Jerusalem not otherwise distinguished in Luke), where we find her in 10:38 with Martha. Martha's condescension toward her reflects the elder brother in the parable, but Mary's close association with the Lord forces her to accept her sister back into the home.
- Mary's faith in John 11 concerning the resurrection of Lazarus may reflect her previous exposure to the raising of the son of the widow of Nain in Luke 7, the day before she came to him to confess her faith.
- She alone among the little band of believers appears to understand his repeated prophecies of his coming death, and when he arrives in Bethany on his way to Jerusalem for the final passover, she resolves to reenact the scene at which she first confessed her faith, in anticipation of his great sacrifice. Thus the repetition of the unusual details of anointing his feet and wiping them with her hair.

Verse-by-Verse Discussion of John's Account

1, Setting

1 six days before the passover.--By conventional dating, this would be the Sabbath.

Bethany, where Lazarus was.--the most distinctive thing about Bethany was that it is the town of Lazarus. The most distinctive thing about Lazarus is that he was raised from the dead.

2-3, The Worship

The Events in Bethany

2 they made him a supper.--As Matthew and Mark show, in the home of Simon the Leper. He could not have been a leper at this time, or else he would not have been able to host the supper. So he must have recovered from his leprosy, and given the usual prognosis for the disease in the Lord's time, it seems likely that he had been healed by Jesus.

Martha ... Lazarus ... Mary.--These are singled out in Greek, each marked with the article to note that we have previously heard of them. "You will naturally want to know the role of each member of the family of whom we spoke in the last chapter."

We have seen so far that each of these family members has a distinct experience with the Lord.

- Mary, as we have seen, was most likely a rebellious youth from a conservative family. Under demonic influence, she fell into very great sin, from which the Lord delivered her.
- Martha's experience of the Lord was just the opposite. She was the model daughter in the family of Bethany, and apparently made a fairly direct transition from orthodox Judaism to confessing Jesus as the Christ (11:27).
- We know least about Lazarus, but he did have the dramatic experience of being drawn back from the grave.

In the present episode, each of them is a prototype for the kinds of relationships that we can have with the Lord. It's worth asking ourselves as we consider them: which is the pattern that we follow? All are believers, but only one is singled out by the Lord for everlasting memorial (Matt 26:13; Mark 14:9).

Martha served.—She is in her usual role as the dutiful hostess, Luke 10:38. Even when she is not in her own home, she notices things that need to be done, and does them.

We often treat Martha as a foil for Mary. If Mary's desire to sit at the feet of Jesus is "the good part," Martha's preoccupation would seem to be "the bad part." But we should not forget that the criticism of Martha in Luke 10 was not for serving. It was for being "cumbered about serving" (v. 40), "careful and troubled" (v. 41), and one guiding principle of the Christian life is, "I would have you without carefulness" (1 Cor 7:32; "be careful for nothing," Phil 4:6).

Peaceful service to others is a wonderful and Christlike ministry.

Mark 10:43 whosoever will be great among you, shall be your servant: 44 And whosoever of you will be the chiefest, shall be slave of all. 45 For even the Son of man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.

We would do well to emulate Martha in her desire to serve the Lord and his people. This is a good

ministry, but the Lord never said of Martha, as he did of Mary (Mark 14:9), “Whosoever this gospel shall be preached throughout the whole world, this also that she hath done shall be spoken of for a memorial of her.”

Lazarus was one of them that sat at the table with him.--Lazarus' position is also noteworthy. He and his friends were “gathered together unto the Lord Jesus,” Matt. 18:20. Note two characteristics of his position. Neither by itself is enough.

- “with him”: Just to sit at table with others is of no value if the Lord be not there.
- “one of them”: While our personal devotions are of great importance, we must not forsake the assembling of ourselves together, Heb 10:25.

Lazarus has assumed the place of Mary in Luke 10:39. He is sitting with Jesus, delighting in his presence and desirous of hearing every word that falls from his lips. Perhaps he reaches higher than Martha because of his greater personal experience of the power of the Lord. Martha's experience was simply to agree with what she had been taught. He had experienced the coldness of death and the Lord's power to deliver him, and now he hangs on every word that the Lord says.

We do not hear of Lazarus before ch. 11. He is not visible in Luke 10. Nor is he later visible on Golgotha or at the tomb, as is Mary. Lazarus “was one of them that sat at table with the Lord.” We should not belittle this position. The Lord loved him (11:5). This is certainly a better position than the dead, cut off from his friends and out of the Lord's presence. And like Mary's position in Luke 10, it reveals a deeper love for the Lord than Martha's busy-ness. But it is not a distinguished position. The Lord never declares that Lazarus will be remembered throughout all ages for sitting at table with him.

3 Then Mary.--Now we come to the central feature of the story. John describes her actions very tersely, with three verbs.

- **took ... a pound of ointment of spikenard, very costly.**--v. 7 tells us that the ointment was not just lying around, but that she has been keeping it for just this purpose. This is not an accidental or casual action. It is deliberate, planned. It has not been many days since the death of Lazarus. She reserved the ointment for the Lord and did not expend it on her own brother. Luke 14:26, “If any *man* come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple.” This is the occasion she has had in mind, and she takes out the ointment that she has purchased at such great cost and preserved so carefully.
- **anointed the feet of Jesus.**--Matt (26:7) and Mark (14:3) point out that she anointed his head, and the Lord's commendation in these witnesses (26:12; 14:8) show that she in fact put it on his body as well. But Mary's purpose is to recall her initial offering to the Lord in the home of Simon the Pharisee. There, anointing his feet was an impulse, driven by the occasion of seeing her tears fall on them. Now it is a deliberate act, to recall that time of her first love.
- **wiped his feet with her hair.**--Again, she is reenacting the episode in Galilee. There, the Lord eloquently expounded her deeds as a sign of love, and now she wants to reexpress that love as clearly as she can.

Many served the Lord like Martha. Many sat to hear his words like Lazarus. But only one woman made this kind of a gift, and the Lord promises that “Whosoever this gospel shall be preached throughout the whole world, *this* also that she hath done shall be spoken of for a memorial of her” (Mark 14:9). What moved her to such depths of love and such heights of expression? The clue is probably back in Luke 7:47. “Her sins, which are many, are forgiven; for she loved much: but to whom little is forgiven,

the same loveth little.” She was conscious of what a great sinner she was, and that led to the outpouring of her love.

Application: Each of us should take stock of our personal spiritual fervor. Are we like Mary, providing necessary service to others but numbed by the experience? Have we reached the level of delight in the Lord reflected in those who sit at table to hear him teach? Are we driven to worship as Mary was? Where are you? Are you where you want to be? Are you where the Lord wants you to be? And if not, how can you climb the ladder?

The clue may lie in the differences among their backgrounds.

- It is a wonderful privilege to be raised in a Christian home, knowing the truth (as Martha did) from the earliest age. But this background may lead you to take the Lord for granted. Such people are likely to be stuck in tedious, joyless service.
- If you would delight more in the words of Christ, and deepen your hunger for his word, meditate on the great power he shows around you. You may not have been raised from the dead as Lazarus was, but every day, “the heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament showeth his handiwork,” Psa 19. Develop the habit of seeing God behind every sunrise, every lovely flower, every beautiful singing bird. If you are an engineer, remind yourself that the world is regular enough to engineer only because it flows from his infinitely rational mind. Cultivate the consciousness of God, and you will naturally want to learn more about him.
- If you would quicken your love for the Lord and your capacity for true worship, you need to raise your awareness of how greatly he has forgiven you. You may not have sinned in the same way as Mary, but you were just as much a rebel against your creator, just as alienated from God as she was. Satan would have us think, “Lord, you’re sure fortunate that such an intelligent, energetic person as I decided to receive your son.” Like the prodigal’s elder brother, we are tempted to say (Luke 15:29), “Lo, these many years do I serve thee, neither transgressed I at any time thy commandment.” We are like the publican in the temple (Luke 18:11), “God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men *are*, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican.” But in fact, we were so sinful that we could not come to the Lord Jesus without the drawing power of God’s Holy Spirit. The more we contemplate our utter helplessness, the love of the Father in choosing us, the love of the Son in bearing our sin, and the love of the Spirit in drawing us to faith, the deeper our love will grow. “We love him, because he first loved us,” 1 John 4:19. The principle goes back to the OT: 1 Sam 12:24, “Only fear the LORD, and serve him in truth with all your heart: for consider how great *things* he hath done for you.”

Comparison with Acts 2:42

It is important for us to give attention to the teaching of Scripture concerning how God is to be worshiped. The Westminster Confession recognized this (21:1)

the acceptable way of worshipping the true God is instituted by Himself, and so limited by His own revealed will, that He may not be worshipped according to the imaginations and devices of men, or the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representation, or any other way not prescribed in the Holy Scripture.

Yet, amazingly, little attention is paid to this subject. Chafer’s Systematic Theology devotes over 250 pages to ecclesiology, the doctrine of the church, but fewer than ten of these deal with how the church is organized or conducts its affairs. There is, though much revelation in the NT on this subject.

One of the foundational passages on church practice in the NT is Acts 2:41-47, which records the practices of the very first church, in Jerusalem. In fact, v. 47 is the first verse in Acts to mention the church. What happened in Bethany aligns strikingly with the pattern of Acts 2. This alignment encourages us that the events there are not simply an historical accident, but a normative pattern that we should seek to emulate.

Review the main elements of Acts 2:41-47. The passage falls into two parts. v. 41 shows how people are “added” to the church, while 42-47 shows how they “continue” in their life together.

First, how were these people “added” (41b)?

1 Then they that gladly received his word.--The church is a community of those who have received the gospel. Those who have not yet trusted the Lord Jesus are welcome to attend its meetings and hear the word preached, but cannot truly be part of it.

were baptized.--Baptism (that is, immersion in water) is the biblical means by which a person confesses that they have received the Lord Jesus. The consistent NT pattern warns us against two practices that are common today.

- Baptizing those who have not believed (such as infants). It is wonderful that Christian parents resolve to raise their children as believers, but baptism is “the answer of a good conscience toward God” (1 Pet 3:21), and an infant can make no such answer. Many churches, including some that preach the gospel and emphasize separation from sin, christen infants, but the practice has no foundation in the NT, and does not constitute biblical baptism. Many, like myself, were christened as children, but later realized the need to confess our personal faith in the Lord by being baptized.
- Admitting to church fellowship those who are not baptized. Baptism is not optional. The Lord commanded his disciples to baptize (Matt 28:19). Peter commanded his hearers on the day of Pentecost to be baptized (Acts 2:38). When Philip preached to the Ethiopian eunuch, the eunuch realized that the very first thing he should do was be baptized (8:36). The first step in church fellowship, after faith, is baptism.

42 And they continued stedfastly.--Now we learn how this community of baptized believers conducted themselves. They were occupied with four things. These four are summarized in v. 42. The short narrative that follows illustrates each of them in turn.

the apostles' doctrine.--“Doctrine” simply means “teaching.” It's what Peter did on Pentecost when he expounded Joel 2, Ps 16 and Ps 110. v. 43 expands on the “apostles' doctrine” by describing the continued evangelistic effort of those early days, backed up by wonders and signs. In evangelical circles, doctrine has always been an important focus of the church, as it should be.

Fellowship.--This word has been greatly degraded in modern usage. Today it means simply “having a good time together.” The Greek word means “having things in common.” In its most basic sense, it is amplified in v. 44, the community of goods that the church in Jerusalem practiced. To have fellowship with someone is to take their needs and concerns as our own.

Breaking of bread.--Most simply, the expression means simply to eat. But the last meal that the Lord shared with his disciples before his crucifixion endowed the practice of a common meal with special significance. This is not just a matter of taking nourishment is clear, because the practice is here part of what people did as a result of being added to the church. Rather, it is what we sometimes call “the Lord's Supper.” v. 46 shows that this was a frequent, even daily practice among the believers. Other passages (Acts 20) shows that it was at least weekly. The Lord commanded his disciples, “do this in

remembrance of me,” and it was the focus of their life together.

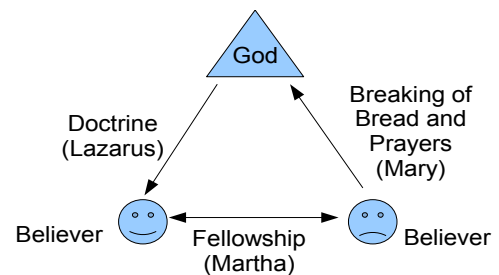
Prayers.--The Lord has purchased for his people access into the holiest of all. We may individually approach the Lord, but many of the NT promises concerning prayer require that we come corporately. We are promised that if we agree as touching any thing that we shall ask, it shall be given us (Matt 18:19), and Acts repeatedly shows us the early church gathered for prayer (4:24; 12:12). In this passage (v. 47), prayer takes the special form of “praising God.”

How do these relate to the simple meal in Bethany in John 12? Martha served. Lazarus sat and learned. Mary worshiped.

- In listening to doctrine, we are like Lazarus, or like Mary in Luke 10, sitting with the Lord to learn from him.
- “Fellowship” corresponds to Martha's activity, seeking to serve the Lord and his people.
- “Breaking of bread” and “prayers” are directed to the Lord. Prayer can be asking for God's blessings, but in Acts 2:47 it is described as “praising God.” Note that these activities are directed primarily to God, not to men—at the Lord's table our words should be focused on praising God, not on instructing one another.

The figure shows the relationship among these concepts.

All are good, but there is a scale among them. As Luke 10 shows, sitting with Jesus to learn of him reflects a more sensitive spirit than just serving busily. But here Mary goes beyond her position in Luke 10. She is actively coming to the Lord, not to do something of practical use for him, or to enrich her own understanding from his words, but to express her love to him.



- It is good for us to serve one another in the name of Christ. We should do this, serving God with our **hands**. We do this whenever we help one another, or provide financial support for some need of which we learn.
- It is better when we have an appetite for the things of God and rejoice in hearing his words, serving him with our **ears** and **minds**. The primary occasion for this is Lord's day AM.
- It is best when our **hearts** are engaged in expressing our love to him. This is the main focus of our activity when we come together to break bread. Our focus should be on the Lord, not on each other. Our main preoccupation should be with prayers and hymns of praise; when we share Scripture, the objective should be to exalt the Lord, not to expound a text, and the response of those who hear should be to echo the praise to the Lord.

3, *The Parallel to the Temple*

the house was filled with the odour of the ointment.--This sounds at first like an inconsequential observation, but John likely means it to be extremely significant. It recalls another instance in the Bible when “the house was filled.” The Chronicler recalls what happened when Solomon dedicated the temple:

2 Chronicles 5:13-14 13 It came even to pass, as the trumpeters and singers *were* as one, to make one sound to be heard in praising and thanking the LORD; and when they lifted up *their*

voice with the trumpets and cymbals and instruments of musick, and praised the LORD, *saying*, For *he is* good; for his mercy *endureth* for ever: that *then* the house was filled with a cloud, *even* the house of the LORD; 14 So that the priests could not stand to minister by reason of the cloud: for the glory of the LORD had filled the house of God.

However humble may be our chapel, when we worship God there, it becomes a glorious temple. Our gift to him results in the filling of the house.

The filling of the house relates to another filling, the filling of our hands. Recall that the Hebrew phrase for ordaining a priest is “fill the hand,” Exod 28:41; 29:9, 29, 33, 35, etc. (usually translated “consecrate”). It was required of worshipers at Israel's feasts that they not appear before the Lord empty (Deut 16:16). Worship is not passive. It requires us to bring an offering to the Lord. Mary didn't just happen to have the ointment lying around. She procured it and kept it for this special occasion. She filled her hands with an offering to bring to the Lord. So should we. When we fill our hands to express our love to him, he will fill the house with his presence.

This is what made the meetings of the early church such a witness to unbelievers. Paul was writing of the breaking of bread meeting in 1 Cor 14:24-25,

24 But if all prophesy, and there come in one that believeth not, or *one* unlearned, he is convinced of all, he is judged of all: 25 And thus are the secrets of his heart made manifest; and so falling down on *his* face he will worship God, and report that God is in you of a truth.

Our worship together at the breaking of bread is the most important thing we do together—and the hardest. Satan will be happy to have us help one another and become expert biblical scholars, if only he can keep us from exalting the name of our blessed Lord. Let us follow the example of Mary, and make this meeting a priority in our schedule and in our preparation. Let us ask God to fill our hands as we come, as Mary made preparation with the ointment, so that we can fitly glorify our great Lord.

4-8 Judas' Protest and the Lord's Rebuke

4 Then saith ... Judas Iscariot.--It is instructive to compare John's record with that of Matthew and Mark. Matt 26:8 says, “When his disciples [plural] saw it, they had indignation,” and raised the complaint. Mark also says that more than one was involved (14:4, “there were some that had indignation within themselves”).

Apparently, others joined in with Judas' criticism. But John, knowing intimately how the little band of disciples was organized, perceives where the source of the criticism lay. Judas' criticism quickly spread to the others.

It does not take much to quench our zeal for worship. We must be very careful that in this regard, we “provoke one another to love and good works.”

5 Why was not ... sold ... given to the poor?--Giving to the poor is not a bad thing to do. Cf. 13:29—apparently sometimes this is just what he would do on their behalf. But it is not the best thing in this circumstance. Judas would replace Mary's worship with Martha's service. In his opinion, the ointment is too valuable, too precious, to spend on a momentary expression of love for the Lord. That shows only how his system of values differed from the Lord. We should keep Judas' criticism in mind when we are tempted to think that preparing for, or participating in, the breaking of bread is not worth the effort. It is the most important thing we do together!

6 not that he cared for the poor.--Judas' prevarication is a warning to us. In our day, many people

seek to urge us to behave in a certain way because of the poor, or because of the environment, or because of some other moral motive. John's analysis reminds us that not everyone who presents such a motive really harbors it. Very often, they are playing on peoples' emotional vulnerabilities and sense of personal responsibility, in order to promote their own personal agenda.

He ... had the bag.--John alone notes this special responsibility of Judas (see also 13:29). In this role he would have overseen the donations of Mary and her friends (Luke 8:2-3). He no doubt was looking forward to a special donation on this visit to her home, and thus was doubly disappointed when the resources were not placed in his charge.

“The bag” reminds us that the Lord and his disciples lived simply, from a common fund. Theirs was a life of poverty. This commitment to financial simplicity did not make them proof against cupidity and covetousness. Even within these constraints, Judas “was a thief,” and James and John coveted seats of special power at the Lord's right and left hand (Matt 20:21). Some people think that sin is the result of our environment, and if we only put people in a better environment, they won't sin, but Judas shows that this is not the case. Another example is those who rebel after the Lord's perfect rule during the millennium, Rev 20:7-8.

7 Let her alone.--The imperative is singular, addressed to Judas. He should not hinder her devotion. In fact, Matthew and Mark show that the Lord goes on to say that wherever the gospel is preached, people will remember positively what she has done. But even Judas, who does not agree with her decision, should “let her alone.”

There is an important principle here concerning our attitude toward other believers. Compare Rom 14:1-6; 15:7. If we are insecure in our own relation with the Lord, we sometimes show this by insisting that others should serve him just the way that we do. Indeed, we ought to “provoke one another to love and good works,” Heb 10:24, and to “reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine,” 2 Tim 4:2. But at the end of the day, Christ's rule is, “Let her alone.” Do not intrude into the devotion of an individual with her Lord.

Matthew Henry: “Christ would not have those censured nor discouraged who sincerely design to please him, though in their honest endeavours there be not all the discretion that may be Though we would not do as they do, yet *let them alone.*”

against the day of my burying.--We have explained her action as a recollection of the earlier events in the house of Simon the Pharisee, in Galilee. But its meaning goes beyond recollection. There, it was looking back at the forgiveness she had received. Here, it is also looking forward to the Lord's coming sacrifice, and the Lord perceives and explains her intention. In the parallels, he says,

Matt 26:12 For in that she hath poured this ointment on my body, she did *it* for my burial.

Mark 14:8 she is come aforehand to anoint my body to the burying.

Both aspects of her worship are relevant as a model for our worship today. The Lord asked his followers to share the bread and the cup “in remembrance of me,” and told them that his body was broken and his blood shed “for you.” When we gather to break bread, our focus should be on the price he paid and the blessing we have received.

hath she kept this.--She did not go out and purchase it just the day before, nor was it left over. She acquired it some time earlier, when she first understood the Lord's repeated teaching about his coming death, and kept it safe until she could acknowledge his sacrifice by anointing him. It is likely that she already had it in the house at the time of Lazarus' death, yet she had not used it for her own brother's burial!

8 For the poor always ye have with you.--The Lord is alluding to Deut 15:11, "For the poor shall never cease out of the land." Moses' words, reinforced by our Lord, are a sober warning against the arrogant claim of politicians to be able to eliminate poverty. God commands us to show mercy to the poor, but poverty, like sickness and decay, is a consequence of sin, and its complete removal awaits the Lord's return. One error that this verse corrects is the notion that we can do away with poverty.

But there is another error against which we must guard. We should not understand the Lord's words in the sense, "You can't do anything to get rid of poverty, so don't bother about the poor." Moses, to whom he alludes, cited the persistence of poverty not as a reason to neglect the poor, but as a motive to charity. The verse continues, "Thou shalt open thine hand wide unto thy brother, to thy poor, and to thy needy, in thy land." Mark recalls that the Lord himself goes on to say, "whenever ye will ye may do them good," and the NT is full of instructions to care for the poor, in particular poor believers. The issue is one of timing.

me ye have not always.--His death is immanent. If she doesn't offer this gift now, the opportunity will pass.

So it is with our worship to the Lord. We will face many distractions, many excuses not to gather with God's people in worship, or not to prepare our hearts and fill our hands. We should have a sense of urgency, and make this a priority in our lives.

9-11, The Popular Response

9 Much people of the Jews therefore ... came.--Compare 11:55. John appears to present the meal in Bethany as the true worship, in contrast with the superficial temple ritual. Many were drawn by the outward pomp, but many also came to the true sanctuary, the simple gathering of God's people. God has his remnant.

not for Jesus' sake only, but that they might see Lazarus also.--Here we see the powerful influence of a life changed by the Lord. People might be confused over the official wrangling about Jesus, but they could not deny the miracle of Lazarus' resurrection, and were drawn by it to consider Jesus' claims more closely.

10 But the chief priests ... put Lazarus also to death.--They cannot deny the miracle, but so set are they in their opposition to the Lord that they seek to remove the evidence.

11 Because that by reason of him many ... believed on Jesus.--Here is the risk of being an effective witness for the Lord. When we draw others to Christ, we become a focal point for satanic opposition. "All that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution," 2 Tim 3:12.