

Exegetical Notes, John 12:1-11

“Mary’s Perfume”

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Verses 1-2

Six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, where Lazarus lived, whom Jesus had raised from the dead.² Here a dinner was given in Jesus’ honor.

Martha served, while Lazarus was among those reclining at the table with him.

- For some time, Jesus had been staying at a little village called Ephraim (see John 11:54) because the religious leaders of Israel were seeking to kill him. But six days before the Passover was to be eaten, Jesus came again to the village of Bethany and the house of Lazarus whom he had raised from the dead (see John 11:1-44).
- To honor Jesus, Lazarus held a banquet. His sister, Martha, prepared the meal.

Verse 3

Then Mary took about a pint of pure nard, an expensive perfume; she poured it on Jesus’ feet and wiped his feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.

- During the meal, Mary, Lazarus’ other sister, did an unthinkable thing. She took a pint of pure nard, a very expensive ointment (Verse 5 says that the value of the nard was equal to a year’s wages) and poured all of it over Jesus’ feet. She then used her hair to dry his feet. This was unthinkable for two reasons: 1. the expense of the nard; and 2. No respectable woman of that day would come into a public place such as a banquet with her head uncovered. What Mary did when she wiped Jesus’ feet with her hair was so intimate that it would have scandalized those present at the banquet.
- That the fragrance was so prominent simply meant that everyone present saw what Mary did.

Verses 4-6

But one of his disciples, Judas Iscariot, who was later to betray him, objected,⁵ “Why wasn’t this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year’s wages.”⁶ He did not say this because he cared about the poor but because

he was a thief; as keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it.

- It was Judas Iscariot, one of the twelve disciples, who objected. He took Mary aside and reprimanded her for wasting the expensive perfume. John says that Judas' real concern was that the perfume could have been sold and the money put into the offering people made to support Jesus' ministry. Since Judas was the treasurer of Jesus' group, he would then have had access to a large amount of money.

Verses 7-8

“Leave her alone,” Jesus replied. “It was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial.”⁸ You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me.”

- Jesus told Judas not to bother Mary about what she had done. Jesus explained that this act was like Caiaphas' unwitting prophesy (see John 11:51-52). Mary's act, according to Jesus, prophesied his coming death and burial.
- This act was the beginning of Holy Week, the last week before Jesus was crucified and buried.
- He reminded those present that the poor, the apparent concern of Judas, would be a continuous on-going problem in a world set out of balance because of sin.

Verses 9-11

Meanwhile a large crowd of Jews found out that Jesus was there and came, not only because of him but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead.¹⁰ So the chief priests made plans to kill Lazarus as well,¹¹ for on account of him many of the Jews were going over to Jesus and believing in him.

- When people heard that Jesus was visiting Lazarus, they came there both to see Jesus and Lazarus because Lazarus had been raised from the dead.
- This caused the chief priests to conclude that both Jesus and Lazarus needed to die because Lazarus' resurrection was bringing people to believe in Jesus.

(These exegetical notes are the foundational study for the sermon entitled *Mary's Perfume*. They have been prepared by the Reverend Doctor Charles H. Jensen, Senior Pastor at Cornerstone Fellowship, Coatesville Pennsylvania. All rights are reserved by *Cornerstone Fellowship* & The Reverend Doctor Charles H. Jensen. They are used here by permission.)