

WORSHIP OR WASTE?

by Ray C. Stedman

This morning we heard from one of our missionaries about a woman whom she had met in Poland. This woman's husband had been imprisoned for his faith by the Polish authorities and he had later died in prison. His wife had gone through severe trials and was presently living in very difficult circumstances, yet, as she talked with our missionary, her heart was filled with joy, peace and strength. We will be looking at the secret of that kind of inner strength, a manifestation of genuine Christianity, in our study in the Gospel of John today.

In our last study we saw that Jesus had retired from the city of Jerusalem to the village of Ephraim, about 14 miles northeast. From there he was free to return directly to the city when his time came, or to go down to the Jordan Valley and join with the groups of pilgrims making their way to the Passover feast. We learn from the other gospels that that indeed was what he eventually did. This is where we pick up the account, as John begins his countdown to the crisis of the cross.

We have noted that John is highly selective in his presentation of the life of Jesus. Toward the end of his gospel he writes, "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name," {John 20:30-31 RSV}. That is why John leaves out incidents which the other gospels include. From this last week of Jesus' ministry, before the final fatal week in Jerusalem, John chooses three incidents. The first, which we will look at today, is a supper that was held in his honor in Bethany. The second is our Lord's triumphal entry into Jerusalem, when he fulfilled the prophecies of Zechariah concerning the King of the Jews; while the third incident is his reaction to the visit of a group of Greeks who asked to see him while he was in the city to celebrate his last Passover feast.

John introduces this account in the closing verses of Chapter 11:

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?" Now the chief priests and the Pharisees had given orders that if any one knew where he was, he should let them know, so that they might arrest him. {John 11:55-57 RSV}

These verses convey the atmosphere that prevailed in Jerusalem just before this Passover. Josephus, the Jewish historian, has written that during the Passover the population of the city frequently rose to more than three million people. There were no hotels or motels to accommodate these vast numbers, so people camped out on the hillsides, stayed with friends, or borrowed homes. They came from all over Palestine and also from many foreign countries, coming, as John writes, to "purify themselves" in anticipation of the Passover.

Further, he declares, "they were looking for Jesus." In these words John introduces the curious, the first of three groups of people who are usually present wherever Jesus is central. By this time Jesus had become notorious throughout the whole countryside. He was the sensation of the nation, so much so that the Pharisees had put out a warrant for his arrest. As far as the Sanhedrin was concerned, he was Public Enemy No. 1. The pilgrims now gathering for the feast wondered if he would dare show himself in defiance of the authorities. Thus the curious, uncertain as to whether or not he would appear, were on the lookout for the notorious prophet from Galilee.

Whenever a well known personage is likely to appear today the curious gather to get a look at him. If Joe Montana were here this morning there wouldn't even be standing room in this place! There's something about our humanity that makes us want to "eyeball" famous people. We are not content with a description. We're not

even satisfied with seeing them on television. We want to actually look upon them. The curious crowd is the first group introduced by John in this account.

I find it remarkable that, twenty centuries later, the name of Jesus still has tremendous drawing power. I talked with my old friend Doug Coe in Washington, D. C. a few weeks ago. Doug works behind the scenes in Washington, meeting with many Senate, Congressional and Pentagon prayer groups that are virtually unknown to the general public. He is probably the most traveled man I know, traveling even to the most obscure countries to speak to many kinds of people. As we talked, he said something which I felt was significant. He told me that if he mentions religion to these various groups he has discovered that the response invariably is very cold. Religion, it seems, is a boring subject worldwide today. Even the mention of Christianity, he told me, causes division. He will not discuss it when he speaks to Muslims, Buddhists, or others. But he has found that no matter where he is in the world when he talks about Jesus -- even when he only mentions his name -- there is an instant, respectful hearing for what he has to say. Everyone is curious about Jesus.

The curious are doubtless here this morning. They want to hear more about this intriguing, mysterious figure of Jesus. As we go through this account, perhaps many of you will want to play the great American game of self-classification. Americans love to take quizzes to determine where they fit. Many here will ask themselves, "Do I find myself in one of these three groups? Am I among those who only want to see and hear something of the famous person of Jesus?"

John shines his spotlight on a second group in the opening words of Chapter 12:

Six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, where Jesus was, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. There they made him a supper; Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at table with him. Mary took a pound of costly ointment of pure nard and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped his feet with her hair, and the house was filled with the fragrance of the ointment. {John 12:1-3 RSV}

Here we meet again our old friends, Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. Here in Bethany they are preparing a special supper for Jesus, not in their own home, but, as we learn from the other gospels, in the home of Simon the leper. We don't know anything about this man, other than the fact that he had been a leper. Very likely he had been healed by Jesus, otherwise he could not have hosted this supper. There is an implication here that Simon had been touched by Jesus, delivered and freed from his disease. Filled with gratitude for what our Lord had done for him, Simon took this opportunity, despite the fact that there was a warrant out for the arrest of the guest of honor, to serve a private supper for Jesus and his intimate friends.

I believe John chose to include this account in order that we might understand something of what real worship is. The commentators have pointed out that in Verses 2-3, Mary, Martha, and Lazarus are each doing something characteristic. Martha is serving; and Lazarus is "with" Jesus at the table (i.e., he is fellowshiping with him); while Mary anoints his feet with a pound of very expensive ointment and wipes them with her hair. Some of the commentators point out that these are to be viewed in ascending order of importance, as levels of relationship to Jesus. Martha served, Lazarus fellowshiped, but Mary worshipped. I don't think that is quite correct. Each of these three actions is a form of worship. It's not true to say that Mary alone worshipped. Martha worshipped by service, and Lazarus by being "with him."

Worship, the center of Christian life, can take various forms. Martha did what she was most comfortable doing -- she served. She, like many among us, found it difficult to express in words how she felt about the Lord, but she loved to serve. She let her hot biscuits do the talking for her! When it comes from a heart like Martha's, that's eloquent language! On another, less successful occasion, Martha tried to put together a spur-of-the-moment meal for Jesus. On that occasion everything fell apart. She was anxious, troubled, and worried, trying to do too much. Finally, she exploded and blamed the whole mess on Jesus, saying to him, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her to help me," {Luke 10:40 RSV}. In that little story in Luke 10 is captured the feeling of many of us. I have often quoted these lines, applying them to Martha,

There's a gladness in her gladness when she's glad,
And a sadness in her sadness when she's sad.
But the gladness in her gladness
And the sadness in her sadness
Are nothing to her madness when she's mad!

That was an apt description of Martha on that first occasion when she made a supper for Jesus. But not this time, in Simon's house. Now she's glad, filled with love for Jesus, rejoicing with her sister over the return of their beloved brother Lazarus from the coldness of death by the power of our Lord. Martha expresses that love in her service at this supper.

Service is legitimate worship. There is nothing more characteristic of Christian faith than to flash the flame of heaven upon everything we do, to see it as being done, in Paul's descriptive phrase, "as unto the Lord," {Eph 5:22b KJV}. You can do your office work "as unto the Lord." You can wash dishes "as unto the Lord." You can scrub floors, talk on the telephone, pack boxes, whatever you may do for a living, "as unto the Lord," and that is true worship. Nothing will transform your work more than to see it done "as unto the Lord." You will make better quality products if you work "as unto the Lord" than if you merely do so for the company that pays your salary. This is the joy of Christian labor.

Years ago I heard about a boy who had to do certain chores for his mother. He thought he should be paid for these jobs which he did around the house, so one morning he made out a bill and laid it beside his mother's breakfast plate. It said,

Washing the car, -- -- --	\$1.00
Taking out garbage -- -- --	.50
Cutting lawn, -- -- -- -- --	1.50
<hr/>	
Total: -- -- -- -- --	\$3.00

His mother looked at it but didn't say a word. But at lunch time when the boy came home from school he found a note beside his plate. It read,

Washing clothes, -- -- --	\$0.00
Ironing shirts, -- -- -- --	0.00
Cooking food, -- -- -- --	0.00
<hr/>	
Total, -- -- -- -- --	\$0.00

Love, Mother.

When he read that he rushed over to his mother and hugged her. Nothing was ever said again about a bill. That's the true service of love. That is how Martha served -- and worshipped.

Lazarus, we read, was one of those "with" Jesus. To be with the Lord is fellowship.

When I was in the Navy we used to call it, "two fellows on the same ship!" There is a germ of truth in that. You are together, doing something together. If this had occurred in our day, Lazarus would have been prominently featured in this account. He was the one who, just a few weeks before this, had been dead for four days. We can only imagine what the media today would do with a story like that. Lazarus would have been on the 700 Club and on the PTL program. He probably would have already signed a contract to write of his experiences during the four days he was dead! He would be so pressed he probably wouldn't even have time to be at this supper!

But notice that in this account he is hardly featured at all. He is content to be "with" Jesus, recalling his power, rejoicing in his companionship, sensing the glory of his presence. That too is a form of worship. This is what we are reminded to do in the Scriptures, to "remember Jesus Christ risen from the dead," {cf, 2 Tim 2:8}. He

is "with" us everywhere we go. That's worship, that's fellowship, holding all things in companionship with him. Lazarus drew no attention to himself. Later in this account we learn that he too was in danger. The chief priests had decided not only to put Jesus to death, but Lazarus also. As far as I know, he is the only person in Scripture to have died twice. Here, however, he is content to be openly and publicly associated with the proscribed person of Jesus of Nazareth. That is worship.

But Mary took a pound of costly ointment and poured it on Jesus. Later, Judas complains about the extravagance of using what, in effect, was a year's pay for a laborer, to anoint the feet of Jesus. In today's inflated terms, this ointment would have been worth perhaps \$10,000. This costly perfume was derived from a special plant which grew only in India. Somehow Mary had obtained a whole pound of it. Her heart was so filled with joy and thanksgiving that she broke the narrow neck of the alabaster jar containing the ointment and poured the whole pound upon Jesus until the fragrance filled the whole house. According to the other gospel accounts, she anointed his head first, and the ointment ran down along his body until it covered his feet. Then she unbound her hair and wiped up the excess ointment with it.

John is particularly aware of the significance of this act. In the accounts in Matthew and Mark, in response to Judas' protest of what he regarded as a waste, Jesus is reported as saying to Judas, "Let her alone. She has done a beautiful thing to me. Wherever this gospel is preached in all the world, this deed shall be spoken of in memory of her," {cf, Matt 26:6-13, Mark 14:3-9}. And John sees this as symbolically filling the whole house of the world as a fragrant manifestation of a heart filled with love and care. Here Mary is expressing in this action all that is in her heart.

It's important to see that it is not Mary Magdalene who does this. Luke records an incident that took place in Galilee, where an unnamed woman bathed the feet of Jesus with her tears and wiped them with her hair. This too occurred in the house of a man named Simon (a familiar name in Israel). Many of the commentators link these accounts together as though they were one. But let us remember that one incident occurred in Galilee, while this incident with the expensive perfume takes place in Bethany, near Jerusalem. Many think Mary Magdalene was the woman involved in the story in Luke 7. That may well be. She had been a notorious prostitute, out of whom Jesus had cast seven demons. Filled with gratitude for this tremendous deliverance, it is highly likely that she expressed herself so eloquently by bathing the feet of Jesus with her tears and wiping them with her hair.

But this incident in John 12 concerns Mary of Bethany, the sister of Martha and Lazarus, about whom there is no mention ever of anything out of line. Yet this account makes clear that she had so understood the work of Jesus and the change he had made in her heart that, though outwardly there was no blot on her record, inwardly she came to be deeply appreciative of the richness and blessing he brought to her life, not only in the restoration of her brother Lazarus, but in the magnificent teaching she heard from him as she sat at his feet. This is what accounts for her extravagance here. She spared no expense, she cared nothing for the customs of the day, entering into a supper where women were usually not welcome, letting down her hair in public, an unthinkable act in that culture, and openly expressing her love for Jesus. But that's how love acts. It is uncaring of expense.

I don't know what young men bring to young women these days to express their love, but, when I was a young man, it was a dozen American Beauty roses. I remember digging deep in my pocket once for what seemed an enormous amount of money (\$6 as I recall), for a dozen such roses for a young lady. But love takes no note of things like expense.

In 1950, the year I came to Palo Alto, I spent the summer traveling around the country with Dr. H. A. Ironside, while my wife had to stay in Great Falls, Montana, at the home of her parents, with our two little girls. One day, toward the end of summer, when I was in Buffalo, New York, I was feeling sorry for her as I thought of her taking care of the children and working very hard, while I was free to travel and meet exciting people, etc. I very much wanted to express my feelings of love, appreciation and gratitude for her. As I walked down a street in Buffalo I saw a beautiful fur coat in a store window. The price, however, was way out of my range, around \$100, although that does not seem like much now. I wanted to take that coat home to Elaine to show my appreciation for all she had done that summer. I told Mrs. Ironside, who was quite wealthy and very sympathetic, what I wanted to do. She was very understanding and offered to loan me the

money to buy the coat. We worked out terms whereby I could pay her back a few dollars a week and I bought the coat. When I got home and gave that incredible gift, which we never could have afforded, to my wife she was amazed and delighted. To this day that coat hangs in a closet in our home, although she has often talked of having it refitted for one of our daughters. I don't think she can bear to part with it because it represents a gift of love, an extravagance that love delights in giving to show what is deep in the heart. (I tell you this story because Elaine is at the Women's Retreat today, and I can get away with it!)

Worship is a heart transformed that expresses itself regardless of cost. That is what service is, and that is what fellowship is -- a choice to invest oneself in order to express the love of a grateful heart.

John places the third group, the counterfeit, in direct contrast to the first two groups. Judas is the first example.

But Jesus Iscariot, one of his disciples (he who was to betray him), said, "Why was this ointment not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor" This he said, not that he cared for the poor but because he was a thief, and as he had the money box he used to take what was put into it. Jesus said. "Let her alone, let her keep it for the day of my burial. The poor you always have with you, but you do not always have me." {John 12:4-8 RSV}

Judas appears as an example of those who regard commitment to the Lord as a waste of time. They try to appear as one with us, but their hearts are far from us. There are many like that in our churches, who are there for purposes other than real worship.

Here John reveals the heart of Judas. He had no care for the poor; that was merely an excuse. As the treasurer of the disciples, he wanted the money for himself. I don't think there's anything more startling about our Lord's selection process than the fact that he appointed Judas treasurer although he well knew what kind of a man he was. John didn't know it at the time, but later it turned out that Judas was a thief who stole money from the money box. As we put together the account from the gospels, his ultimate purpose for stealing money is revealed: He wanted to buy a piece of land! At the time of his betrayal of Jesus he lacked only thirty pieces of silver to complete this transaction, and that was the amount he contracted for to betray our Lord. All the while he had been surreptitiously taking money in order to purchase a piece of land on which he could build a house in anticipation of the day when (he thought) Jesus would become the king of all the earth. Writing his gospel later, John declares of Judas, "he was the one who was to betray him." That betrayal was already evident in this incident of Judas' complaining over what he claimed was a waste of money. Worship, in his eyes, was but a waste.

Many people who outwardly seem to be committed to Christ, in fact, really think of worship as a waste of time. They don't worship God. They don't do their work "as unto the Lord." They fall in step with the ways of the world. At the end of this account John includes in the third group the chief priests, these outwardly religious men who inwardly were hateful murderers, conferring together to find ways to trap Jesus. Both groups, the curious and the counterfeit, join in the crowd crying out at Pilate's judgment seat, "Crucify him! Crucify him!" {Luke 23:21, John 19:6}. This is John's revelation of what happens in the unworshipping heart.

There is a television commercial being shown these days of a young man, apparently a jogger, all sweaty and shiny, sitting and eating a bowl of bran flakes. He says, "If it makes sense to take care of the outer man, it makes sense to take care of the inner man, too!" Then he goes on to extol the great qualities of the cereal he is eating. He is implying, of course, that the "inner man" is the stomach, and that he is taking care of both the outer and inner man. How characteristic of our day! Ours is a materialistic age, devoted to externals, content to evaluate everything according to whether it helps us outwardly or not.

Though the philosophy behind that commercial is correct, the identification is distorted. The stomach, of course, is also part of the outward man. Their philosophy, however, is correct. If it makes sense to take care of the outer man (and that is what we do: spending hours painting, perfuming, shaving, and feeding the outer man), how much more does it make sense to take care of the inner man, the true inner man, the spirit, where

joy and peace and the glory of life are found? True riches belong to the spirit, never to the outward things of life.

Johnny Carson's wife can't get along on \$44,000 a month! So money doesn't buy joy. There is something missing in the inner life.

That is what this passage is saying. Here are three simple people, Mary, Martha, Lazarus, unknown, obscure, but rich, filled with love, peace and joy to such a degree that they can only express it in the best way they can, according to their temperaments, in ways that say how much their lives have been blessed by Jesus of Nazareth. That's what worship is -- reminding yourself how much Jesus means to you.

Years ago I heard a story of an old Navajo Indian on whose land oil had been discovered. That had made him very rich, but it hadn't changed his lifestyle. Every now and then he'd go to the bank where he kept his money and say to the banker, "Sheep all dead. Corn withered. Wells gone dry." Then the banker would fill a bag with silver dollars and set it on a table for the old man to count. When he had finished counting, he would say to the banker, "Sheep all well. Corn crop fine. Wells filled with water." Then he would return to his home. What was this wise old man actually doing in this ritual? He was counting up his resources. Although they were the wrong resources he found strength and encouragement in counting them.

The principle is even more true for the inner man. Let us count the resources we have in our risen Lord. Let us think again of all he has protected us from, let us thank him for the tests to which he has put us, the challenges that lie before us, and then let us carry that attitude with us, and all week long remind ourselves of his companionship, and of the fact that all we do is done unto his glory and in his name. That is true worship. Worship comes from a heart that has been blessed by God, and says so in its own way, continually expressing its gratitude to the Lord who fills it so full and makes it so rich.

Which group do you belong to?

- The curious?
- The counterfeit? -- or
- The committed?

May God grant it is the third.

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