

RUF Bible Study – John
Doug Serven, RUF Campus Minister¹
November 16, 2008
John 12 – Devotion to Jesus

Have you ever received an unexpected, lavish gift? I have three gifts in mind, two of which weren't expensive at all, but illustrate my point. All three were given to me because of my birthday.

The first is a good example of an unexpected, delightful gift. After we met to talk last week, Becky gave me a bag, and I pulled out a massive bag of Sour Patch Kids. Delicious. Thankfully, my kids ate most of them, or else I'd be in the hospital in a sugar coma. Becky did this because she listens – she knew I loved this candy. I mentioned it in my message that night at RUF, and gave example of what candies I don't like as a contrast.

Of course I should have expected the next gift. Katherine and Mitchell showed up with a bag of their own the following day. Candy corn and circus peanuts – disgusting. They'd been listening too, and brought the exact candies I had said I didn't like. It was a joke, and thankfully there were people around who actually did like those candies (I'm not sure why), so we didn't have to throw them away.

The last present that comes to mind is the one my mother bought me this year. I pulled out a Kindle from the gift bag (does anyone wrap anymore?). It's an electronic book that is incredibly cool. My sister was there and even said, "Wow! Who loves you?!"

I appreciate these thoughtful gifts, especially since gifts are my love language. When someone is thinking about me and gives me something, I know they love me and care for me.

The main action in our story today is a gift, a lavish, expensive one. We'll look at the various actors in the story, and see what we can learn from them. Try to pick out someone or a group of people and see if you can put yourself in the story in that place.

Jesus

It's tempting to want to leave the best for last, but I want to start with Jesus instead of finish with him. He's the main actor in the story, of course, and if we want to identify with someone, don't choose him. You are not Jesus in the story.

Jesus has just healed his friend Lazarus from the dead in the previous chapter. Jesus also declared, I Am the Resurrection and the Life. It is his greatest miracle, and one that shows his glory the strongest and highest. Many people believed in Jesus because of this sign.

However, this was the last straw for the Pharisees. This last miracle really affected them. They plot to kill Lazarus (12:9-11) to get rid of the evidence he presents merely by walking around.

They couldn't take any more of Jesus and his actions. They had no idea what he might do next. He had to go. So they started the machinery to kill him. 11:47-48: *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 our place and our nation.* After they discussed the matter for a time, we read the summary, *"So from that day on they made plans to put him to death."* (11:53) The authorities give orders that anyone who sees or hears of Jesus should turn him in so he can be arrested.

Jesus is in trouble. He's going to be killed. We have an incredible tension coming to a head here; it's been building since chapter 2 in the book of John. So it's important to understand that Jesus knows this and walks straight into it. He has said over and over that his purpose is to come to die for his people – and he's going to do it.

When he walks into Jerusalem in chapter 12, he knows exactly what he's doing. He's coming to fulfill the prophecies of the Old Testament as the Beloved Son of God, the King of kings, the Suffering Servant come to die for his people. Jesus takes all of the worship in this chapter and doesn't shy away from it all. He accepts being called the one who comes in the name of the Lord, the King of Israel. The people yell at him that their king has arrived, and they are more right than they know.

He also speaks and teaches about himself. Again, he identifies himself with the mission and work of the Father. He says, *The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.* (12:24) Jesus tells us and his disciples about his purpose. When he says he must be glorified, he means he must die. The kernel of wheat must fall to the ground and die. This is one reason he came in riding on a donkey, to say something about the humble work he had to do as their king. He didn't come in with a white stallion or battalion of soldiers, but on a borrowed donkey.

¹ © Doug Serven, 2008 You are permitted and encouraged to reproduce and distribute this material in any format provided that you do not alter the wording in any way, you do not charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction, and you do not make more than 500 physical copies. For web posting, a link to this document on our website is preferred. Any exceptions to the above must be explicitly approved by Doug Serven.

Please include the following statement on any distributed copy: By Doug Serven, © Doug Serven, 2008, website: www.ouruf.org. For this series, I used commentaries on John from Boice, Skip Ryan, Gary Burge, D.A. Carson, Hughes, Wright, Calvin and Leon Morris and listened to sermons by as many people as I can find, especially Tim Keller, Ricky Jones, Fred Harrell and Scott Sherman. The reader should assume that none of the ideas expressed are original to me.

Jesus says his hour has finally come. We've looked at this through the book of John. The word "hour" means the hour of his death. Jesus will glorify his Father by dying for his people. John tells us that a thundering voice came from heaven that agrees with Jesus. People could hear it – that must have been crazy, crazy, crazy.

Jesus then talks about his own resurrection, about coming back from the dead, being lifted out of the earth. The Son of Man must die in order to be raised again.

I'm not sure how we can yet apply this part of the story. The only thing I can think of is that it's like a Bob Stoops sighting in town. "There he is!" you whisper. Our football savior has come. He's in our midst. He's living and active. He makes statements about himself and his team. He kicks people off in judgment, and he brings people on with scholarships. He speaks in coachspeak, which we often think we understand. He takes actions we wonder about, talk about, and often we are asked to just trust that he knows what he's doing.

Bob Stoops as Jesus? No. Though some of you might be tempted to think so, and get more excited about seeing your football coach than in seeing or talking to Jesus. Jesus is the king. He is to be worshipped. He went to the cross with tears, and yet he went with a resolute courage. He went for his people, to release them from their sins.

You are not Jesus in this story.

The Pharisees, Council and Judas

Here we have the main antagonists from the story. Jesus is in conflict with these men. The sides were picked years ago, and things have not smoothed out. Knowing what we know about Judas' betrayal coming up, John gives us a bit of foreshadowing about Judas when he balks at the perfume from Mary.

Why were these men so intensely mad at Jesus? They hated him because of fear.

They were afraid that Jesus was going to ruin everything. They voice this in 11:40: *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.* Here's what's important to realize – they were right. That is exactly what eventually happened. Not because of Jesus though. There was another leader who got in trouble with the Romans. The Romans pursued him, and he led everyone into the temple where he thought they'd be safe. The Romans burned and destroyed the temple, thankful for such a nice collection place for their enemies.

So their fears weren't unfounded.

What do you fear about Jesus? What do you think he might undo if you really were to believe in him?

He might totally change the way you date. He might mess up your potential spouse pool. He might call you to live a different lifestyle than you want. He might force you to relate with your siblings or parents differently. What do you find threatening about Jesus?

They also feared being found out. Jesus kept on pointing out their moral, religious and spiritual inadequacies. Since he was the light, the pure light, their darkness was brought into a stark contrast.

We hate being found out, don't we? Ugh. To be discovered as the one who stole it, or the one who looked at it, or the one who misplaced it, or the one who used it. Ricky Jones tells the story of when he lost his child at the University of Tulsa football game. His name was announced to the whole crowd – 50,000 people knew he was a bad father. Ricky seemed to embrace it, but most of us will do anything to avoid being found out. We like to present a perfect image of ourselves as good people.

And these were the "good people" of the day. These were the perfect Sunday School attenders. These people never, ever missed an RUF meeting or Bible study. They gave away their money at just the right amount. They helped little old ladies across the street. They were the presidents of the Abstinence Clubs.²

What irks them so much is that the people who loved Jesus were the screw ups. The ones who followed him were the outcasts, the bad people, the lost and helpless ones who hadn't been faithful. They didn't know the right answers. They were prostitutes, drunks, tax collectors and lepers. This isn't what it was supposed to be like!

When Jesus said he came for sinners, we don't think he really meant it. Not sinners like that. Not bad people like that. But it's the so-good people that don't ever get it, who don't ever hear Jesus, who don't follow and believe him.

Judas thinks he's giving the right answer when Mary pours out the perfume. This should have been given to the poor – right Jesus? He's greedy yes, but he's also trying to get things right. Jesus says, No, that's wrong, and Judas is furious. When Jesus tells Judas there is another way of thinking, something he doesn't know and understand, that angers Judas. He's not teachable or approachable. He's afraid of being wrong.

Are you afraid of being found out? I am. I can relate to the Pharisees and tax collectors. Are you afraid of giving the wrong answer? Do you only answer if you *know* you're right? Do you hate it when someone else gives the right answer and it's not you? Do you get irritated when other children are praised and not yours? Are you upset that you aren't running your life, your kids, your schooling, your career, your marriage right?

What do you love more than Jesus? Being right. Being competent. Being in charge. Being safe. Those are all things that keep us from loving Jesus as we should.

² From Ricky Jones

The best illustration I can think of is the difference between when I play golf and when I play racquetball. I love to play racquetball, and I play 2-3 times a week. I've been playing for over twenty years, so I'm not bragging when I say I'm pretty good. I have more than one racquet, special shoes and gloves (and gloves for under the gloves), and goggles...

But because I know what I should do, and I know how to do it, I often – too often! – get frustrated. If I don't hit a shot I think I should, I get mad and yell. I hit my racquet on the wall (not good). After several of these moments in a row, I have been known to swear (embarrassing).

What am I so afraid of? Why am I so angry? Where is the joy and fun of racquetball? Somehow I start to think that doing well and winning in this game is my life, is what defines me, is what I'm all about. I have to take a deep breath, remind myself of what is true (racquetball is supposed to be fun, if I lose it's okay, I am loved apart from this hour). Sometimes that actually works.

Contrast that with my golf game. I still play with the set of clubs my dad got me when I was in eighth grade. The one wood driver has a width of about four inches (half the size of what people play with now). The head on my pitching wedge flies off when I swing it. I buy driving range balls to play with.

So when I hit a bad shot in the woods it doesn't bother me. Why not? I'm a bad golfer. Bad golfers hit bad shots. I don't purposely try to hit into the woods (that might be a good strategy actually), but I'm out for fun. I try to hit it into the cup eventually, and I know how to play and how to swing, but I go up and address the ball and hit it. Oh well. It feels good when I hit a good one, but I'm not throwing a fit when I hit a bad one. Golfing doesn't define me.

I wish I were more golfing than racquetball. I'm a Pharisee when I play racquetball, and I'm a Christian when I play golf.

What are you afraid of? What is keeping you from enjoying and loving and following Jesus? Are you so worried about being good that you can't love Jesus anymore?

The people and crowds

Maybe you're one of the antagonists in this story. Maybe you hate Jesus because he scares you, and he gets in your way with what you want to do.

But maybe you're like the crowds in this story. What did they do? They treated Jesus like a rock star. They threw a huge parade for him. They'd heard about what he'd done with Lazarus. They maybe didn't understand it, but they heard about it, and they liked it. They wanted to catch a glimpse of him. They wanted to touch him, get his autograph. They lined the streets, shouted his name, said, "Hosanna! Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord." They were ready to crown him as king, to give them all they had and let them lead them.

They wanted saving. Hosanna! means "Save us now!" So they were anxious to be saved. However, they didn't want the type and way of saving Jesus was offering. He has been talking about the way of suffering and death. That a kernel of wheat must fall to the ground and die in order to live. That the first must be last. That you have to give up your life to find it. That to be glorified is to die.

They don't want that. They want someone to come in and smash the Romans to the sea. They want a political, nationalistic savior. They want a judge who will strike the enemy from their lands, restore their people to autonomy and bring about the great nation that they had in David's reign.

They want to use Jesus for purposes against his design. They want stability and morality.

We can relate to this, can't we? Every four years, we hear political savior language. We just heard it with Obama. He will save us politically and economically. He will save us socially, the first black president. He will save us globally, or so we hope.

Many of you thought about George W. Bush. He will be our conservative savior. He'll restore family values and morality. He'll repeal bad laws and amendments. He'll be tough on crime.

It didn't work. It won't work. The tears shed for Obama as savior will be disappointed ones soon enough. He just can't bear that sort of weight, however good of a man he is.

Why do we put our trust in leaders like this? We long for a savior, but we don't know what to do with the one we have. Jesus doesn't seem good enough to us. He's not working like we want him to. His kingdom is the church, but our 401Ks are shrinking!

What is strange about this passage is how the people aren't claiming these things about the president, or their fund managers, or a future potential spouse – they're actually talking about Jesus. But are they?

We see here a misguided emotional reaction to a Jesus-like construction, Jesus made in the image they want him to be. I think this can happen to us. We are talking about a Jesus, but not *the* Jesus. We have in our minds what we want him to be like, and often we worship an image of him, or a construction of him that isn't connected to reality. Most of the time, it isn't related to death. We want conquering, but not through death. We want transformation, but not through resurrection.

The crowd turned on Jesus just a few days later, which should give us pause. He didn't turn out like they thought he would, so they left him, abandoned him and crucified him.

What about you? Do you truly understand the work of Christ? Do you just go along with the crowd, singing praises to Jesus but not really, fully understanding what it is he came to do?

How can I get you to relate to this properly? What about when OU won its last national championship in 2000. It had been a few years since its last one in 1985. So the celebration was enormous. People were excited, thrilled and elated about what Bob Stoops did with that team. They *loved* Stoops and quarterback Josh Heupel. Can you even imagine if the next week after the parade, they killed Stoops? They hanged him on the campus of OU?

Being hailed as a national hero one day and then strung up like a criminal the next day – how could that happen? It did happen because the people didn't understand what it would take for their salvation. Some hated him, and those people turned the crowd against Jesus.

Are you seeking something other than Jesus and his work to save you? Will you turn on him so easily?

Mary

There is at least someone who got it. There weren't many who understood what Jesus was going to do, or why he had to it. We might have expected better from all these devout people, all the religious leaders and even Jesus' own disciples. They either seem misguided, hating or dense.

Mary, however, displays an attitude of worship. Remember that Mary's brother Lazarus had been raised by the dead by Jesus. She had witnessed this. She had seen Jesus' tears (11:35) and been in the presence of his power. Others had seen this too, and many had believed.

Mary takes it even farther. This is what we read of in 12:1-7, the beginning part of chapter 12. Jesus is staying in the town of Bethany, and Mary, Martha and Lazarus throw a dinner party, surely a celebration dinner. Happy first new birthday to Lazarus! Happy un-funeral!

The text says that Mary *therefore* took a pound of perfume. Because of what Jesus has done, she is prompted to act.

Adding to the same story we read in Mark 14, we find out that Mary broke the flask of perfume and poured it over Jesus' head. When she was done, she wiped his feet with her hair.

People were not happy with this. People were indignant. They were angry. Why?

There were a few reasons.

One, this display was considered extravagant and excessive. People expected some amount of perfume at a banquet like this. Remember that people didn't bathe like we did. They didn't bathe often at all. So they counted on perfumes and ointments to mask the smell. At a dinner party like this, it would be expected for everyone to get a little dab of perfume so people didn't absolutely stink. But she dumped it all out. Every drop instead of just a drop.

In addition, perfume like this was expensive. Pure nard was the good stuff. John notes that this would have been worth 300 denarii, which would amount to almost a year's wages. Imagine if you brought out a \$40,000 keg of beer and drank it all at once. This would have been way over the top. This much perfume would have been supposed to last for a long, long time. It would also have been the equivalent of a savings account, an insurance policy in case things went south in the economy. It was a hedge against instability. A whole year's worth of savings.

Did Mary pour it down the tube? She used her savings to worship Jesus. She poured it all out, anointing him with this perfume. She broke the bottle, giving it all to him. It sure seems like she understands that she is anointing him for his burial. She's not saying he's super smelly and needs that much perfume; she's communicating she understands he has to die for his people. She's one of the few people who has been listening.

She is giving all of her worth to Jesus. Everything to him. No looking back. No level of devotion is good enough. She's not giving 10% and being content with that. She's giving way more, over and above.

Second, this display would be considered lavish and intimate. When she wipes her feet with her hair, she is pushing the boundaries of acceptable behavior. Jews wouldn't have anything to do with each other's feet. Feet were considered vulgar and foul. It was the job of slaves to touch and wash feet, and they had to be Gentile slaves. Jewish slaves wouldn't even stoop that low. Mary washes his feet with her hair.

A woman letting down her hair would be scandalous. No one saw a woman's hair in public. Her hair was reserved for her husband in her house. People would have been absolutely shocked at this.

Mary simply doesn't care that she looks crazy in loving and worshiping Jesus. She gives him her all in her finances, in the symbolism of the anointing for burial and in her love and intimacy. Isn't that a wonderful, beautiful picture?

Isn't that startling to those of us in staid, reserved Presbyterianism? Don't we often look down on such passion, feeling that it's undignified or uncouth to behave in such a manner? We think, Well, that person will calm down soon enough...

Yet, this is the person who might "get it" the most in the whole New Testament. Mary shows a faith, belief, trust and devotion that is incredible. She's always sitting at Jesus' feet. You can tell she's listening to Jesus, processing his words and actions at a different level than anyone else. She is following Jesus. And in doing so, she gives him an appropriate, expensive, intimate, worshipful gift.

Jesus loves the poor. He's ministered to the poor time and time again. It's because he loves the poor that he can say this gift is so worthwhile. Because the poor are so valuable, it proves how amazingly valuable this gift truly is.

One of the reasons I love working with college students is because of their passion. It oozes out of them. They are totally into things. It may be video games, but they're into it. They love football, and hanging out and politics and well... whatever. They seem to be all in, no matter what it is. Maybe this is changing with our more suspicious coming generations.

I think as we get older our passions get narrower. It seems like older people (ahem, like me) are passionate about fewer things. When they are excited, they're really excited, but they do their best to dampen expectations and "see through" things.

I don't want to do that. I want to learn from the college students. I want to love or hate things. I don't always want to sound detached from everything, like the unobserved observer, like the unevaluated evaluator. I can be so afraid of giving an opinion that might be disagreed with, that I can never give an opinion at all.

I like Mary a lot. She is a woman I admire greatly. What must have been going through her mind when she broke the box and let down her hair to worship Jesus? This was not a reserved, polite admiration. This was a wild devotion, a passionate betrayal of societal norms.

We're a busy people. We're trying to make a name for ourselves. We're afraid of so many things. We keep ourselves so busy, often so we don't have to think about who we are or what we're doing.

Are you tired of searching for saviors? Are you just tired?

In Jean Fleming's book, *Between Walden and the Whirlwind*, she writes:

In the twenty years I have been a Christian, I received instruction on and been challenged to:

Read my Bible daily,

Pray without ceasing,

Do in-depth Bible study regularly,

Memorize Scripture,

Meditate day and night,

Fellowship with other believers,

Always be ready to give an answer to questioning unbelievers,

Give to missions and to the poor,

Work as unto the Lord,

Use my time judiciously,

Give thanks in all circumstances,

Serve the body to use my gifts to edify others,

Keep a clean house as a testament,

Practice gracious hospitality,

Submit to my husband,

Love and train my children,

Disciple other women,

Manage finances as a good steward,

Involve myself in school and community activities,

Develop and maintain non-Christian friendships,

Stimulate my mind with careful reading,

Improve my diet through health and exercise,

Color-coordinate my wardrobe,

Watch my posture,

And – Simplify my life by baking my own bread.

That's quite a list. Isn't there a better way? Those are all good things, but is that what Christianity is about? Again, who are you in this story? Are you fighting against Jesus openly? Are you misguided in your devotion, or following your own idea of who and what Jesus is? Or are you like Mary, who gives everything she has to Jesus.

This text tells us Christianity is about dying to yourself and pouring out your life to him. You can only do that if you know he has poured out his life for you so you can live. "George Muller exercised a wide influence for God. When someone asked him, 'What has been the secret of your life?' Muller hung his head and said, 'There was a day when I died.' Then he bent lower and said, 'Died to George Muller, his opinions, preferences, tastes, and will: died to the world, its approval or censure; died to the approval or blame even of brethren or friends.' The kind of power, reign and royalty that death brings to life will make pretenders of this world turn green with envy."³

Mary gave a great gift of worship to her Lord Jesus. It had a content because it was connected to his death and his suffering. It certainly had a great cost, and she symbolically gave her whole life in discipleship to Jesus. It had a certain abandon, for she didn't care if it were inappropriate to the room. Jesus' work on her behalf prompted her to this great faith. May it do the same for us.

³ Hughes, 301

