

JESUS' JOURNEY to the CROSS
Loving God with Everything We Have
John 12:1-11
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Take a look at the pictures on the screen behind me.

- PSU fans
- Duke fans
- Phillies' fans

Those are pictures of fans of some of my favorite sports teams, but what else do you see? The people in those pictures aren't passive observers. They're into their teams.

How about this one?

- Michael Jackson Concert

That crowd is into it as well. That picture comes from a Michael Jackson concert in Germany. How about this one?

- Billy Graham Crusade

This is from a Billy Graham crusade. It looks similar to the other pictures with the exception that almost everyone in this picture has their eyes closed. Let's look at those pictures again.

The focus of our Scripture text today is worship. In the account we'll be looking at a woman passionately worshiped Jesus and it made people around her uncomfortable. In fact, one of Jesus' disciples complained that the money this woman invested in her offering of worship to Jesus could have been used for a much more worthy cause...feeding the poor.

So, what is worship? In seeking to answer that question, I did what many of us do when we have a question these days, I googled it. Webster on-line informed me that the first definition is, ***"To honor or show reverence to a divine being or supernatural power."*** The second definition is, ***"To regard with great or extravagant respect, honor, or devotion."*** One of those definitions speaks to the kind of worship that takes place here on Sundays and to how we live our lives for God throughout the week, and the other refers to respect or devotion people give to human beings—that's what we saw in the pictures of crowds at sporting events and at

the Michael Jackson concert. The Old English word *worship* literally means ***“To ascribe worth to.”***

The Bible is filled with statements about worship, but I’ll give you two that I find particularly insightful. In Matthew’s Gospel chapter 22 Jesus was being tested by the religious leaders. They were trying to bait Him into saying something incriminating so they could arrest Him, but Jesus was simply too sharp for them. Finally, an expert in the Jewish law asked, *“Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?”* The beauty of the question—at least the expert thought—was that by choosing a commandment to emphasize Jesus would open Himself up to criticism by having to leave out other worthy commandments. It seemed like a foolproof trap, but Jesus refused to allow Himself to be boxed in. He summarized all the Scriptures with this statement. ***“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment.”*** Matthew 22:37 & 38 Jesus identified worshiping God as the first and greatest commandment. And He went on say that the 2nd greatest commandment was loving our neighbors as ourselves and that all the Law and Prophets hinged on these two commandments.

The second statement I’d like to highlight from the Bible about worship is found in a book that the Apostle Paul wrote to the Church in Rome. This is a verse I frequently pray at the beginning of my day as I commit myself and my activities that day to God. At the beginning of Romans chapter 12 Paul writes, ***“I urge you brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship.”*** Romans 12:1 Worship isn’t just singing on Sundays or praying or reading our Bible in our personal time with God. Worship is offering our whole selves to God. Presenting ourselves to Him as a living sacrifice.

I want us to keep those Scriptures in mind as we look at our text for today: John’s Gospel chapter 12. I’ll begin by reading verses 1 & 2 to set the context for us...

Six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, where Lazarus lived, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. Here a dinner was given in Jesus’ honor. Martha served, while Lazarus was among those reclining at the table with him.

There’s a lot of important information in these two verses. The events that are about to take place occurred just 6 days before the Passover Festival—the Jew’s celebration of their

forefathers and mothers deliverance from Egypt and Pharaoh, when God killed all of the first-born Egyptian sons and livestock, but spared the Israelites who put the blood of a lamb on their doorpost. Our sermon series title is, “Jesus’ Journey to the Cross.” Jesus is making his way toward Jerusalem for the Passover. In John chapter 12 verse 12, right after these events we read, *“The next day the great crowd that had come for the festival heard that Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem. They took palm branches and went out to meet him, shouting, “Hosanna!”* The story we’ll look at in a moment took place on the day before Palm Sunday, meaning the events in John chapter 12 occurred just 5 days prior to Jesus’ crucifixion.

We also learn from these verses that Jesus was in Bethany where Lazarus lived with his sisters, Mary and Martha. **Map of Bethany and Jerusalem** Bethany was a “suburb” of Jerusalem—located just 3 miles from the Holy City. Bethany was also the home of Lazarus—a close friend of Jesus and the man Jesus had raised from the dead. The account of Jesus raising his friend Lazarus from the dead is found just one chapter earlier in John chapter 11. It wasn’t a coincidence that Jesus performed this miracle not long before He Himself would be resurrected. In John chapter 11 verses 23-25 Jesus was having a discussion with Lazarus’ sister Martha and He told her, *“Your brother will rise again.”* Martha replied that she was aware that Lazarus would rise again at the last day. And then Jesus spoke these prophetic words, *“I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?”* John 11:25 & 26 Another interesting connection between Lazarus and Jesus is that when word reached the Pharisees that Jesus had raised a man to life, they intensified their plans to arrest and kill Jesus. Jesus’ act of raising Lazarus from death intensified the religious leaders’ commitment to kill Jesus. The religious leaders called a meeting and said, *“If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and then the Romans will come and take away both our temple and our nation.”* John 11:48 As the Passover Festival approached the chief priests and Pharisees had many people on the lookout for Jesus with the instructions that if they found Him they were to report his whereabouts to the authorities so Jesus could be arrested.

We also learn in these first two verses of John chapter 12 that Martha served the dinner. Martha and her sister, Mary, are well known for the squabble they had in front of Jesus

in Luke's Gospel chapter 10. On that occasion, Jesus and his disciples were visiting with Mary and Martha and Lazarus at their home. Martha was distracted by all the preparations for hosting Jesus and the meal for Him and his disciples, while Mary was sitting at Jesus' feet listening to Jesus teach. Martha complained to Jesus that Mary wasn't helping with the preparations, but Jesus gently rebuked her by telling her not to worry about unimportant things and He told her that Mary had chosen what was best. Biblical commentators point out that the problem Martha had with her sister wasn't just that she wasn't helping her with the preparations, Mary was sitting with the men in the room reserved for the men, listening to Jesus teach. Mary wasn't in her right place. She wasn't following the proper protocol for that culture by assuming the place that women normally assumed. Keep that in mind as we read our text in a few moments.

Each of the Gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke and John—record a scene with a woman anointing Jesus' feet with oil. Luke's account is significantly different from the others, because he mentions a sinful woman coming to Jesus in the home of a Pharisee. Matthew, Mark and John's accounts all take place in Bethany, but Matthew and Mark's account took place at the home of Simon the Leper. While there are similarities in the accounts and people tend to lump them together, it appears we have 3 different accounts of women anointing Jesus' feet and drying them with their hair. Follow along now as I read verses 3-11 of chapter 12:

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.

But one of his disciples, Judas Iscariot, who was later to betray him, objected, "Why wasn't this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year's wages." 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.

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

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. So the chief priests made plans to kill Lazarus as well, for on account of him many of the Jews were going over to Jesus and believing in him. John 12:1-11

I find it interesting that these two women are portrayed in the same roles they were in from when Jesus was with them in the past. Martha is serving the guests and Mary is

worshiping Jesus. We tend to simplify Martha and Mary by portraying Martha as the activist and Mary as the contemplative—there may be some truth to that, but there’s also more going on here. Mary is held before us as an example of what worship looks like. In John chapter 11, she broke with established custom and sat with the men so that she might hear Jesus. And in this instance, she brings criticism to herself by worshiping Jesus extravagantly. It wasn’t socially acceptable for a woman to interact with a man like this. In every instance where the Gospels record a woman anointing Jesus’ feet, people were upset by what they deemed inappropriate behavior. Touching Jesus, pouring oil on his feet and then drying his feet with her hair might be expected of a prostitute, but they weren’t the actions of a respectable woman. But the act of anointing Jesus’ feet and drying them wasn’t the only thing that made Mary’s worship unusual. Judas, the treasurer of the disciples, calculated that the perfume Mary poured on Jesus’ feet was worth a year’s wages—\$50,000-\$100,000 or more in our economy. By anyone’s account, that was an expensive offering.

Judas complained that this money should have been given to the poor, and John makes the side note that as treasurer, Judas used to help himself to the group’s funds—the disciples apparently didn’t have a good auditing system in place. ☹️ Jesus however, praises Mary’s act of worship. He tells Judas “*leave her alone,*” and He goes on to say that in anointing Him in this way, Mary is actually preparing his body for burial. The closer Jesus gets to Jerusalem, the more openly He speaks about his upcoming death.

And the passage ends with the interesting note that the chief priests planned to kill Lazarus, because many of the Jews were believing that Jesus was God’s Son. If they couldn’t refute Jesus’ teaching that He was God’s Son, they refused to stand by and watch a man Jesus had raised from the dead testify that Jesus was the Messiah.

I want us to think about the central focus of this Scripture—Mary’s worship of Jesus. Mary ignored society’s view of where her rightful place was. She spent time with Jesus in the company of men, when her culture said she should be helping her sister prepare the meal. Mary wasn’t constrained by what people around her viewed as appropriate. She bathed Jesus’ feet and dried them with her hair. And she invested great expense in her worship—anointing

Jesus' feet with perfume which cost an extraordinary amount of money. Mary worshiped Jesus whole-heartedly.

My point in this sermon isn't to challenge you to be more expressive in your worship at church. In fact, it's our narrow understanding of worship—confining it to what takes place in a church on Sunday mornings during the time of singing—that makes it challenging for us to recognize worship is a life posture. Some of us worship with our hands upraised; others like to clap; some people dance or wave flags or bounce up and down. Some cry or kneel or lay prostrate. Others worship in a more subdued way. I get nervous when we try to prescribe what worship should look like, because we're all very different. But Mary worshiped Jesus with all her heart. She refused to be boxed in by what her culture or people around her told her was appropriate and she went to great expense to worship Jesus.

My question for each of us to wrestle with is this: **What does it look like for you and me to worship God wholeheartedly?** How do we follow what Jesus said was the greatest commandment—to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength? It may not look like Mary or like the examples of worship we saw at the beginning of the sermon at sporting events or at a concert, but what does loving God fully look like for you? Worship may doesn't have to be exuberant to be real, but what does it say about us if we passionately and unashamedly express ourselves at concerts and sporting events yet are quiet and subdued and self-conscious about expressing our love and devotion to God. What does it look like for you and me to offer our bodies as living sacrifices to God as an acceptable act of worship? **These last days of Lent, with the celebration of Jesus' resurrection at Easter just 2 weeks away, is a fitting time for us to reflect on what it means for us to worship God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength.**