

The Devotion of a True Disciple

John 12:1-8

This is a bit of a funny question to ask a group of Christians in a church... But do you ever find Christians a bit embarrassing? You know, Christians who take their Christianity a little too far? I'm not talking about Christians who hold to fringe positions or try and get you to vote a certain way or anything like that. I'm talking about those Christians who are *over the top* in their devotion. Do you know what I mean?

You can tell in how they speak or what they do with their time. Maybe one of them brought you to church this morning. They're breathlessly captured by the Lord Jesus Christ, they're always talking about how wonderful he is. They are always helping people out, from cooking meals to minding children. They sacrifice their own comfort for other people, and they do it ALL THE TIME! But mostly they don't seem to care what people think of them, they just get on with doing what they know needs to be done.

How do you feel when you see Christians like that? Maybe you're secretly proud of them but you don't want to show it because most of the other people in the room seem unimpressed.

Or maybe, if you're more like me, you feel a little ashamed that they are somehow 'outdoing you'. You feel like you should be doing more somehow. You feel like they are doing something wrong but they are so sincere and earnest in what they are doing.

Maybe you even despise Christians like that. Goody-two-shoes, always trying to look so special. They don't have to take it so seriously do they?

Maybe you have Christian friends like this and the sort of devotion they show doesn't really make sense to you.

But how are you *supposed* to feel? Why are some Christians like this and others not? Should all Christians be like this?

Today (as we approach Easter) we're going to see two ways of relating to the Lord Jesus, and see which way makes more sense.

But first it's going to be worth our while to make sure we know where we are up to in the story.

By this stage in John's gospel, Jesus had been travelling for about three years and as an obedient Jew was heading towards Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover which would happen in about a week's time.

(The Passover was a big feast that the Jews celebrated to remember that God had rescued them out of slavery in Egypt).

Just before our passage, the Lord Jesus had waited until a friend of his, Lazarus, had died before going and visiting him.

Now, at first, that would seem like a callous and uncaring but when Jesus got there he brought Lazarus back from the dead by speaking to him. Jesus called to Lazarus and told him to come out of his tomb, and Lazarus walked back out.

(Pause)

Raising a man back to life caused various people to become increasingly angry with Jesus to the point where he decided to lay low for a few days. But now, in today's passage, he returns to the house of the family of Lazarus, and to Lazarus' sisters Mary and Martha.

And we read this in verse 1:

"Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. ² There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him."

So far, everything is how you would expect it. Well apart for the bit about Lazarus having been raised from the dead I guess!

A close and dear friend comes after some days and so they receive him warmly and give him and his friends some dinner.

You can imagine the scene. Jesus and at least some of his disciples came into the house. Lazarus and his sisters and the others in the house are delighted and put together a dinner. There's a good number of them around the table. We think that in those days the tables were pretty low and people sat on cushions more than seats. They kind of laid on their sides with their feet on the outside.

Lazarus is with them, maybe he's laughing and joking with them. Martha is going about her business making sure everyone is getting fed and has enough to drink and the rest. It's a merry scene as old friends get to spend time with one another. Jesus seems a bit distracted but he's always like that these days. Most people are laughing and joking, eating and drinking and sharing stories.

And then, seemingly out of nowhere, the strangest thing happens. Verse 3.

³ Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.

Nard is a type of perfume. She took about 327mL (coke can 375mL) of perfume and just started pouring it all over Jesus feet.

A normal flask holds about an ounce, this one held about 11 ounces. And she just pours it out. Just pouring and pouring and pouring. Everyone is silent and watching this happen.

Then she crouches over and wiped his feet with her hair. She could have used a towel but she used her own hair.

And she's used so much of the perfume that the whole house is filled with the smell of it. (Pause)

Now that's weird. That's strange right? And it's not as though it's strange for us and it wasn't for them. There's plenty about this that is odd.

Normally you would anoint someone's head not their feet. You may *wash* their feet, or, more commonly give them some water to wash their own feet, but you wouldn't anoint them. And when you anoint someone you don't usually wipe the oil off, it just stays there. And wiping with her hair was just as odd then as it would be today.

But Mary did all those things. People are looking from Jesus to Mary to each other, back to Jesus. What's he going to do? Is he going to say something?

Verse 4,

“⁴ But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, ⁵ “Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?” ⁶ (He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.)

The first person to give judgement on what Mary had done was Judas Iscariot. You can almost hear the disdain in his voice. The indignation. ‘That’s good money you’re pouring all over his feet! We could have sold that and had the money, what a waste!’

300 denarii. 1 denarius was about a days work for a labourer so by the time you take out 52 Sabbaths and a few holy days you’ve got about a *year’s wages* in a bottle.

To give you an idea, these days a construction labourer makes just under \$42 000 a year. I don’t know if it’s equivalent, construction workers probably weren’t paid as that well in the first century, but it’s an enormous sum of money to be pouring on feet. A year’s wages in about 10 seconds. Outrageous! Right?

But here’s one of the questions I have about all this is: Did Judas have a point here? I mean, was Judas right about this?

Cos’ when you think about it, the perfume *could* have been sold and given to the poor. And if Judas is right about how much it’s worth, they could have fed or even housed some of the poor of their day.

There were people who were *desperately* poor around them, Jesus himself will say that in a couple of verses. There were people who needed food and shelter. And this woman was pouring all that perfume on the feet of a traveller.

There were real needs and they could have met the real needs of the people around them.

But there are a couple of things wrong with what Jesus was saying. The first, Don Carson helpfully points out when he says,

“social activism, even that which meets real needs, sometimes masks a spirit that knows nothing of worship and adoration.”

That is, social activism, feeding the hungry, housing the homeless and the like, even when it is doing real good, can disguise a person who is unwilling to properly acknowledge how they should respond to what God has done.

So you can do real good for people and have nothing to do with treating God how he's meant to be treated.

Simply doing the right thing doesn't automatically mean you are serving God.

And this is what Judas is doing. But how do we know this? The text itself tells us:

Verse 4 tells us two things about Judas. Have a look with me. First that he was a disciple, so he was close with the Lord Jesus. Second, he was about to betray his Lord, or King.

And then after Judas had complained about what she did, John tells us *why* he raised the issue. Verse 6 again, “He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.”

Judas, despite what it looked like, didn't care about the poor. He had no intention of *ever* giving any of that money to them, or using it to help them.

And when you think about it, having a year's wages in a bag *you carried* on behalf of the group would make it even easier to help yourself and not get caught.

Of course, the other disciples didn't know this at the time. John writes this *after* the events had taken place, and presumably after they had discovered that he was a thief.

Which means as far as they were concerned Judas, one of them, was raising a fairly reasonable sounding concern. Couldn't we have used that to help the poor?

The problem? He was not serving himself but serving God.

Before I keep going, I just want to make something clear. I'm not saying that as Christians that we should *only* care for people's spiritual concerns and ignore their earthly needs. I'm not saying that.

We can and should do what we can to help people out of poverty, to feed and house and clothe them.

There are people in our church that do incredible work in this area. [REDACTED] does incredible work. I hope you are praying for her and asking her how you might join in the work and support what she is trying to achieve.

But if that is the case then why has Judas got it wrong? Well we know part of the answer already, don't we? Judas had no intention of actually helping the poor. He just wanted more money in the bag so that he could help himself to it. But what if he were sincere? Would it be different then? Surprisingly, no.

(Pause)

Because there's something else going on here. And we see it in Jesus' response. Let me show you what I mean from verse 7, have a look with me.

⁷ Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. ⁸ You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

The 'she-bought-it' part is extra but the point remains the same, she is preparing the Lord Jesus his death.

People have all sorts of ways of preparing a body for burial. I studied Ancient History at University and it was remarkable to see the differences across different cultures.

The Egyptians went to great lengths to preserve bodies as best they could because you would need them in the afterlife. The wealthy would be mummified by various processes and the poor would simply bury their relatives in the sand knowing that the dryness would prevent the body from decaying.

The Ancient Romans, for hundreds of years, would cremate the bodies of the dead, which was the complete opposite of the Egyptians.

Mary, was preparing the Lord Jesus for his death. They would always have the poor but they would not always have him. Why? Because he himself was preparing for his own death.

If we were to read on in John's narrative, we would see that shortly after this the Lord Jesus would ride into Jerusalem for the last time.

A few days after his arrival in that famous city he would be dragged away in the middle of the night by men who hated him. Those same men would incite the occupying Romans to have him killed.

And, in many ways like Lazarus, his body would be put in a tomb dead and after a few days, he would walk out alive. There's much more to be said about this, and you should keep coming to church over Easter to hear more of it.

Today, we're left with a startling comparison. There are two disciples of the Lord Jesus on display.

On one hand we have Judas. Named as a disciple, even one of the 12 inner disciples. The man who was so trusted by those around him that he was given the money bag to take care of. He was smart enough to know at least roughly how much the perfume was worth.

And yet, he had no real concern for the poor. And he stole from the bag. And he betrayed the Lord Jesus.

The man who was called a disciple, who showed all the outward signs of being connected with the man who would give life, received death.

On the other side, we have Mary. A disciple of the Lord also. She served him and followed him. She watched him bring her brother back from the dead. And when he returned to her house she showed such devotion to him, even wiping his feet with her hair, that none of the disciples knew what to say.

The Lord Jesus did. He commends her dedication and fills it with meaning. The Lord Jesus knew well that he was days away from being killed and more than that, taking on the wrath or anger of God as punishment for what we did to offend God. He knew that very soon he would die and be punished by God for the sins of the world.

(Pause)

While his disciples are eating and drinking and laughing with close friends, Mary, in her small quiet way, went about her service of her Lord. (Pause)

At the start, I asked you about those Christians who are embarrassingly devoted to Christianity. They are almost undignified in how they go about being a Christian. It's like they don't care what they look like, as long as they doing what's right by God.

Mary was like that. It doesn't matter how long your hair is, there is nothing dignified about getting it close enough to feet to wipe away perfume.

We don't know how wealthy or otherwise this family was. Maybe she was able to buy the perfume herself, perhaps she inherited it. But she was unashamed in her generous, lavish maybe even gratuitous display of giving to her Lord.

Some/ thought it wasteful and thoughtless, but the Lord Jesus himself defends her action.

How do we feel about Christians like that? Are we embarrassed? Ashamed?

More importantly, are we spiteful towards them in their devotion? Do you ever find yourself feeling that way towards other Christians? That's dangerous ground isn't it? We've seen today what that looks like haven't we?

The Lord Jesus said to them that they wouldn't have him for much longer. They didn't have much time to go. In that period, as they were approaching the end, the normal rules go out the window.

It's kind of like in most sports as you get close to the close of play, that final siren. The time for playing it safe is over. There isn't much time, we can't hold back at a time like this.

Friends, we live in an age like this. We live knowing that our Lord Jesus will return very soon. We must make pragmatic decisions of course, but what God is saying to us this morning is this:

These are two disciples of the Lord Jesus. One showed utter, selfless, undignified devotion and the other showed contempt.

As the time grows short, as we await the return of the Lord, how are you going to relate to the Lord?

Will you call yourself a Christian, a disciple of Christ but do so at a comfortable distance? You can be *involved*, you do stuff around the place, just not too much lest people think less of you.

But then again, Judas, was called a disciple. He had an important job: he kept the money bag. He was *involved* too, wasn't he?

(Pause)

Or will you abandon what the world thinks of you, abandon looking good in their eyes and *devote* yourself entirely to the service of the Lord? Will you give yourself to him, no matter what he calls for. That is the disciple that the Lord Jesus commends, that's who he will share all eternity with.

Not *because* we are so single minded but because as disciples who trust in what the Lord Jesus has done for us. In thankfulness for paying the price we could never hope to pay we devote ourselves to him and his service.

What does that sort of devotion look like? (I'd like us to speak together about what that might look like but I have a couple of ideas to get us started).

Maybe it means working harder at our relationships with our non-Christian friends. Maybe we need to be devoting ourselves to people who aren't quite as easy to get on with as our church friends.

Or perhaps it means taking a risk and being unashamed with those people. If you have long term friends, will you find a way to talk with them about these things? It's a little awkward, and maybe they'll think less of you, but it's worth it isn't it? If you don't know how to start a conversation like that, ask someone. Ask me, ask Pete. There're few conversations a pastor would rather have than 'Can you help me to talk to my friends about our Lord?' Pete would love to chat with you about that.

One more. We have our Annual General Meeting coming up shortly. What is it going to look like to live unashamably for the Lord this year? What are you going to do about the deficit in giving? How are you going to use your time this year? Will you ask those who are working at making the gospel known in our parish if they need your help? Will your devotion be seen by the Father in how determined you are in praying for them?

Lastly, if you are not yet a disciple or follower of the Lord Jesus and you are still making up your mind, we'd love you to keep coming to church over the next few weeks. We're going to be hearing more about what Jesus did for us as we get closer to Easter. So come and hear about how and why a chippie from a small backwater town is worth this kind of devotion after more than 2000 years.

But, brothers and sisters, to finish: We have an amazing God. He walked to us death for us. There is only a short time left. He is worth our utter devotion, he is our Saviour, our example, our Lord. Let us give him what he is worth, let us *devote* ourselves to him

Let's pray.