

John 12:1-11 - What do you do with your treasure?

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[0 : 00] Good morning, everyone. Today's reading is John chapter 12, beginning at verse 1. Do find a church Bible around you and you can find the reading on page 1079.

John chapter 12, beginning at verse 1. 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.

[1 : 49] So the chief priests made plans to kill Lazarus as well, for on account of him, many Jews were going over to Jesus and believing in him. Great. Thank you, Pesh.

And there are some spare Bibles probably at the top of the balcony. If you don't have one or you can't see one, it would help you to have one in front of you as we follow along through it. But let me pray as we come to God's word.

Let me pray. Heavenly Father, what a great privilege, not only to live in this world that you have made, but also to be able to hear your voice as you speak through your word to us.

And so I pray now that all of us, whatever our situation, wherever we're from, whether we come here regularly, whether this is the very first time we've ever been in any kind of church, I pray that all of us would get to listen to what you say.

Take my words, weak as they are, and use them for your glory. I pray that all of us would leave transformed and changed. In Jesus' name. Amen.

[2 : 57] Amen. Now, I wonder as we start, whether you will with me just try and ponder on or think of something, or something that you have or would perhaps like to have, which represents your hopes and your dreams.

Maybe it's an object that you own. Maybe it's something that you're aspiring to own or aspiring to do. Perhaps it's a qualification you're working towards.

Something that sort of the existence of it captures what you're really about and who you are. Now, I don't know all of you in the room, but let me try and have a guess at some things that it might be.

Maybe it's a car, right? Cars are a common status symbol, aren't they? Maybe you have a shiny BMW parked outside, and that says something about you, doesn't it?

That you don't give way and that you don't stop at red lights. It says that, at least, doesn't it?

Perhaps you are. I'm not that shallow. I don't have any of my hopes and dreams tied up in a car.

[4 : 05] Perhaps for you, it's your wardrobe, the clothes that you wear, right? You always make sure that you're well turned out. You're stylish and maybe cool, even.

Or perhaps it's something that's been handed down to you by generations on generations. Perhaps it's a family heirloom or a piece of jewellery or something.

And it speaks to you of your family connections. I belong to this group of people. They are my people. That's where I'm from, who I belong to. Maybe, though, it's something you're aspiring to.

London is full of young people aspiring to make things or gain things for themselves. Perhaps it's a career ladder that you're climbing. It's a qualification, a savings goal, maybe.

Maybe. Or maybe you're a parent. And it's a dream that you're pushing your children to achieve in your place, on your behalf. Well, whatever it is for you, if you were to ask Lazarus' sister, Mary, in our passage this morning, if you were to ask her that question, she would tell you, now, for me, it's a

pint of pure nard or half a litre, depending on whether she was speaking to you in American or British English, right?

[5 : 28] Now, nard is a funny word. If you look down in your Bibles in verse 3, you'll notice that John explains it as expensive perfume. And historians at the time will tell you that nard is a sweet-smelling, fragrant oil that was derived from the root and spike of the nard plant, which at the time only grew in India.

And so this is expensive perfume, as John describes it, is actually high-end, imported fragrance. Now, this isn't kind of Hugo Boss or Yves Saint Laurent or Dior or anything.

This is way, way more expensive than that. This is next level. And verse 3 tells you that it's not just any nard. This is pure nard.

It's not been watered down with olive oil or something. It's not been blended with Lidl's own brand perfume. This is the real deal. Carried on camels from India and bought in Jerusalem's most expensive shops.

Judas, in verse 5, tells you that it's worth a year's wages. 300 denarii, he says. That's probably somewhere near maybe 30 grand or something, he says.

[6 : 41] So it's fair to say that for Mary, owning that was a serious business. This is a statement of her wealth. It's the statement of her identity as a significant woman.

You would ask around town, oh, do you know Mary? Oh, you mean Mary, the one who owns a pint of pure nard? Yeah, I know her. I've met her. I spoke to her the other day. Now, of course, if that's the context, right, that means, doesn't it, that the story of John 12 that we've just read, this story is all about giving up treasure.

That's what it's about. Mary pours out her treasure in such a way that she cannot get it back. And not just a dribble of it, she pours out the whole thing on the feet of Jesus and then wipes his feet with her hair, filling the room with a fresh, fragrant smell.

Now, we'll think in a moment about why she did it, but it's worth noticing that not everybody is happy. You saw that, didn't you? When Pesh read it for us. Not everybody is happy. Judas, for a start, he thinks it's a waste of money, money that should have been spent more wisely.

Look at verse 5. Why wasn't this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year's wages. It's not actually a terrible point, is it? But he doesn't make it because he cares about the poor.

[8 : 00] He makes it because he doesn't share Mary's passion for Jesus. So John tells us in verse 6 he didn't care about the poor. He was a thief. And as keeper of the money bag, he stole what was put into it.

But it's not just Judas who is unimpressed. The chief priests are also unimpressed. The chief priests at the time, they think this Jesus thing is getting out of hand. Having planned to get rid of Jesus at the end of chapter 11, they now add Lazarus to the hit list in verses 10 and 11.

It turns out that if you bring a guy out of the tomb, everybody wants to listen to him and hear his story. And so the Jewish leaders, unimpressed, want to get rid of him as well.

But if Judas and the Jewish leaders are unimpressed, it's fair to say that Jesus is impressed.

Jesus says in verse 7 that Mary has saved the perfume by pouring it on his feet. It's a strange sentence. Look down at verse 7. Leave her alone, Jesus replies to Judas.

[9 : 06] It was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial. This is a few days before Jesus' death. But Jesus doesn't mean, oh, she's gone a bit too early.

She's poured it out a few days before she should have done. No, what he's saying there is this is the right use of that fragrance. This is what nard exists for.

This is how you save pure nard. Saving pure nard is to pour it on the feet of Jesus while you get the chance. Because he says the poor you will always have with you, but me you won't.

There's only a few opportunities in life to meet Jesus like this. Now, put that all together for a moment. And it's pretty clear what the story is about.

Mary thinks, Jesus agrees, and John tells us that Jesus is more precious than nard. Much more precious.

[10 : 07] In fact, so much more precious that the way to save nard, if you like, the very purpose of nard, the appropriate use of all treasure is to pour it out on the feet of Jesus.

So it doesn't really matter, does it, what your nard is? Because if you know who Jesus is, if you see Jesus like Mary saw Jesus, then you will see that Jesus is greater treasure than whatever else it is

you hold on to.

Now, I just hope you can see, even right at the very beginning here, just how helpful that is. We're used to, aren't we, talking about Christians as if a Christian is someone who believes that Jesus existed.

Perhaps we believe that a Christian is someone who is maybe interested enough in Jesus to listen to some of the things that he has to say. They attend church from time to time because they're kind of into the Jesus thing.

But even Judas and the chief priests would meet that criteria of being a Christian, wouldn't they? So it's got to be something more than that. That can't be right.

[11 : 13] And so John here is explaining to you and to me what a Christian really is. A Christian, he says, is not someone who just believes a few stated facts about Jesus. But a Christian, someone who really believes in Jesus, is someone who recognizes the value of Jesus, so much so that they take whatever is most precious to them and they pour it out at his feet.

That's a Christian, he says. So we take the things that define us, the things that we imagine that we couldn't do without, the things that we imagine are bringing us security and confidence, and we say, these things are nothing compared to you, Jesus.

Nothing compared to you. All that I am, I give to you, we say. Perhaps you're here this morning and you're a friend of Zane. Zane or Martinez.

And perhaps you've seen this change in them. You can see that for them, being a Christian is not just that they believe a set of ideas about Jesus. It's not just that they have sympathy for a certain community or a culture.

Really, if you were to describe it, it would be something like this. Somehow, Jesus has become the most important thing in their lives. Everything else that they trusted in, everything else that they hoped in, all of that seems to have gone away, have been poured out.

[12 : 35] And now Jesus is their greatest treasure. And John says, no, that's because they've become a Christian. That's what a real Christian is. Maybe I could be so bold as to ask you whether you have seen that about Jesus.

Can I ask you whether you have seen in Jesus what Mary saw in Jesus? What John is trying to show you? Perhaps you would describe yourself as a Christian this morning.

Maybe you're even a regular at church. And perhaps I've even slightly offended you by asking the question. But just for a moment, suspend the offense and just say, listen, is it just that I'm fascinated about the ideas about Jesus?

Or I have some sympathy with his moral code? Or is it that I am persuaded deep in my heart that Jesus is the greatest treasure this world can afford? And that I should follow Mary's example?

Now that's a big ask, isn't it? And so John, I think, gives us two reasons, two things that would persuade us that Mary has done exactly the right thing here and that we should follow her example. And so the first thing to notice is this.

[13 : 41] Jesus poured out his life for you. This is all over John's book, right? But it's hinted at even in this story. Verse 1, look down at it. Six days before Passover, we're told.

Now Passover is when Jesus is going to be taken to the cross. So the events of this story happen six days before Jesus dies on the cross. It's probably maybe the Saturday night after sundown, end of the Sabbath.

And by Friday, Jesus is going to be crucified. But John isn't just concerned about the timing. It's not just a note of the timing here. Rather, the point is that the Passover celebration sheds some light for you on what's actually going on.

Passover, if you know, is the Jewish celebration of the liberation from Egypt. A liberation which came at the cost of a lamb. A sacrificial lamb whose blood was shed and painted on the doorposts of every home.

And so that the angel of judgment passed over their houses when he came. And in John's book, right from the very beginning of John's book, Jesus has been identified as being that lamb.

[14 : 50] John the Baptist, at the beginning of the Gospel of John, sees Jesus walking towards him and says, Behold the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

And now it's six days before Passover. And in verse seven, Jesus says he's about to be buried. And in verse eight, he says, you're not going to have me with you for much longer.

Because Jesus is about to go to the cross in the place of sinners. The lamb of God facing the judgment of God in the place of his people. Now, when you see it in that context, can you see what's happening here?

Mary is pouring out her treasure on the feet of the one who poured out his life for her. Mary's not crazy, is she, in the story?

She's not just taking it all a bit too seriously. No, Mary is responding in kind to the Lord Jesus, the lamb of God, who in a few days' time will give his life for her rescue.

[15:55] Not from slavery in Egypt, but from slavery to sin and death. And so she pulls out her treasure on him who poured out his life for her. Think about it like this.

Go back to thinking what your greatest treasure is. Your car, your reputation, your fit, your phone, whatever it is. Your aspirations for a job and money. Ask this question of it, right?

What has your treasure ever done for you? What is it given for you? I mean, your car might impress, but your car doesn't care about you, does it?

Your career or your reputation or status, it might be impressive on LinkedIn. It might open doors for you, but it doesn't love you. It doesn't serve you in any way. Even the sentimental connection that we have with our family through an heirloom that we treasure, it might bring us kind of meaning and significance in a place that we feel like we belong, but it doesn't help us with moral guilt in the face of a holy God.

Of course, it was the same for Mary's Nard, wasn't it? Mary's Nard brought her status, right? There would be very few people in her community who would own such a thing.

[17:06] And so she had the creds, right? It would also bring her a level of security, I would imagine. It's portable cash, isn't it, in those days.

It's like the go bag, yeah? I can just grab it and run. Or if terrible people are descending on the house, I can bury it and hide it from invaders or occupying Romans or thieves.

And it's more secure, isn't it? Because it's not like cattle who get sick and die. It's not like sheep who wander off. It's not like her house that she could get kicked out of or that could get burnt down. No, it was 30 grand in the hand whenever she wanted it.

But for all of that, Nard never really cared about Mary. I mean, she must have had to save up and sacrifice to get it, but it was a totally one-way street. And here in John 12, she encounters the Son of God in human flesh, her maker, reclining in front of her, eating at her table, who in a few short days will be hanging on a cross, bleeding out under the judgment of God in her place, the innocent Lamb of God in the place of sinful humanity, there for her freedom and her forgiveness.

And she goes, wow, this treasure is yours, Jesus. You are worth more than this.

[18:26] You've done more for me than this could ever do. You are true treasure. Perhaps one of the greatest ironies in life, it's a tragic irony, is that we spend so much of our time and our energy making sacrifices for things that ultimately do nothing for us, while ignoring the one who left the glories of heaven for the filth of a Roman cross, because following him is way too much of a sacrifice.

Jesus says, deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me. And we say, wait a minute. That's all a bit extreme. You know, Jesus, if you'd said, read your Bible a bit, go to church a few times a year, try and be a good person, I would have done that.

But take up your cross and follow me? Really? And so what do we do? Well, we go away and we sacrifice sleep and family to get ahead at work.

We go without food to save for a dream holiday. We disown loyal friends for new friends and a new reputation. It's not that we're scared of sacrifice, is it? It's that we perpetually sacrifice to things that don't care and can't help.

And we don't recognize that Jesus is the one who poured out his blood for us. The one who faced God's righteous judgment for our sin endured hell that we might enter glory.

[19:52] And if we'd see that like Mary did, we would willingly pour out our treasure on his feet. Of course, that's not just how the Christian life starts, is it? It's not just that you recognize the brilliance of Jesus once at the beginning, and then you're just going to get on with life.

No, this is the Christian life over and over. Remember, the Westminster divines in the 1640s meeting in Westminster Abbey, trying to kind of write down the core doctrines that would be the shape of the Church of England for the years to come.

They said, what should a Christian do when they witness baptism? They said they should improve on their baptism. Now, what does that mean? Well, it doesn't mean by doing it again. That would be total chaos, wouldn't it?

But what they mean is that in seeing it, you should see again who Jesus is and what he's done for you. You should see again that Jesus is the one who poured out himself to wash away your sin. And you should again sacrifice yourself for him, giving up the treasures of your life that you might follow him. And it's not that we don't have cars or have careers or have reputations or families, and it's not that those things aren't important to us, but rather we see that those things are not true treasure in a world where God the Son gave his life for me.

[21 : 07] But there's another reason here why Jesus is worth following. Not only did Jesus die for you, the story is also really very clear that Jesus gives resurrection life to you. Again, this comes up multiple times.

Look down at verse 1. Lazarus is introduced as the one whom Jesus had raised from the dead. It's exactly the same phrase in verse 9. And I don't imagine that John thinks you've forgotten that between verse 1 and verse 9.

It's really just that you can't mention Lazarus' name without now mentioning what Jesus has done for him. The whole dinner, you're told, in verse 2 is given in honour of Jesus Christ, in honour of the one who has the power to raise the dead.

It's an attempt to hide Jesus' resurrection power that lies behind the priest's desire to kill Lazarus in verse 10. You see, if the first thing that John wants you to notice is that Jesus is the Lamb of God who pours out his life for you, Jesus is not just that, but he is greater treasure also because he can give you life beyond the grave.

So this is what he wants you to notice. Jesus died, and Jesus will rise, and Jesus does give resurrection life. John says, Jesus is the one whose power is not stopped by death.

[22 : 23] He alone has keys to life beyond the grave. To die is not to lose Jesus, but to gain the life he promised. Of course, that revolutionises everything, doesn't it?

Because not only did Nard not die for Mary, but also for Mary to die would be for her to leave her Nard behind. Of course, that's true for all of our treasures, isn't it?

Whatever it is that you treasure now, whatever it is that you're trusting in to keep you safe, you will, I will, when we die, leave it behind. Our treasure is pathetic in the face of death.

You know, if you've ever had the sad duty, like I have a couple of times, of clearing out someone's home when they've passed away, you'll have been struck, like me, that you just leave everything behind, don't you?

Every scrap of paper, every piece of loose change, every treasure possession, every valuable item. The only thing you do not leave behind is Jesus Christ, if you trust in him.

[23 : 26] Because to die is not to lose him, but to go to him. And there's more to this too, isn't there? Because if that's right, if Jesus is the resurrection and the life that whoever believes in him will never die, then of course the only way to use treasure is for his glory.

You know, Mary pours out the nard on the feet of Jesus, and Jesus says, no, this is the way you save nard. This is its purpose. How so? Well, because she's used it for the purpose of giving glory to the only one who deserves glory.

Glory to the one who won't leave her or forsake her, even in the grain. Again, imagine that you could ask Mary this imaginary question. You could go to her and you say, listen, I wonder, Mary, could you just tell me, you know, that nard that you saved up so long for, that set you apart from all of your neighbors.

When did that nard, when did it give you the most pleasure? When did you enjoy it the most? Was it when it was on your shelf and you got it down just to look at it every now and again?

Was it when people said to you, wow, I can't believe that you managed to afford that? That's incredible. And I should say, that nard brought me the most pleasure when I broke it open on the feet of Jesus and poured it out on him who is the real treasure.

[24 : 46] That's when I enjoyed it most. And so it is for us. All of our treasures bring us some kind of temporary joy, but the only way to really enjoy them is to see that their great purpose is to bring glory to Jesus and not to you.

The family that you're blessed with, the reputation that you enjoy, the gifts that you have, even the car that you drive, the marriage that you're hoping for, the career that you're working towards, all of

those will bring you the most joy when you use them for the glory of Jesus, pouring them out on his feet and saying, nothing compares to you.

All of these are temporary pleasures on my way to eternity with you, the King of Kings. In verse three, John tells you that the fragrance of the nard poured out fills the house.

The word that is used there is the same of the fragrant offering. The fragrant offering appears several times in the New Testament. It links back to the Old Testament temple. Literally, if I could put it like this, this is what it smells like when God is pleased.

And that smells fills the house here. In other words, you could literally smell Mary's devotion to Jesus and it smelt beautiful.

[26 : 08] So what about you? What about me? Are we ready to make this room smell sweetly of love for the Lord Jesus? Sounds weird when you put it like that, doesn't it?

But you know what I mean. Are we ready to take the great treasures of our lives and to see that their very purpose of existence is to pour them out on the feet of Jesus?

The only one who gave himself in your place, on the cross, for your sin. And the only one with the power over death to raise us to new life.

Well, listen, maybe for you this morning, this is the very first time that you'll do that. And you'll say, listen, I've played around with this before. I've kind of gone to church and I've said that I'm kind of interested in Jesus, but I've never done this before.

Well, if that's you this morning, I'd love to speak to you afterwards. I'd love you to sign up to Christian to Explored. I've got some little leaflets here and I'd love to give you one of those so that you might take away and read it and think some more on it.

[27 : 12] But maybe you're a Christian here this morning. You've been a Christian for a long time. Can I say to you again, listen, today is a great day for you again to pour out your treasure on the feet of Jesus and to say, you alone are worthy.

I trust in you alone. You get all the glory. Let me pray as I close. Heavenly Father, we thank you that Jesus is great treasure.

Thank you that he is great treasure because he alone is the one who died for us. He alone is the one with resurrection power. And so we say this morning that all of the things that we are entertained by or interested in, we pour those out at the feet of Jesus and we say, no, Jesus is our treasure.

He is the one that we love above all things. We turn to him and we trust in him. And Lord, we pray as we stand and sing and we sing these truths together, would we mean them from our hearts, we pray.

Would you help us to bring glory to your name with the lives that you've given us. In Jesus' name, amen. Amen. Amen.