

THE GENEROUS HEART

• A BIBLE STUDY FEAST FOR ALL •

Session 5 – The woman at Bethany: *ENTER*

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APPETISER
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The following background notes are provided to help you in preparation for the main teaching and follow-up activities. A summary of the content is provided in the teaching video to be shown in the 'Today's Special' section of this session.

'ENTER his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise; give thanks to him and praise his name.' (Psalm 100:4)

In *The Message* paraphrase we are called to *'Enter with the password: "Thank you!"'* (Psalm 100:4)

Our Scripture today shares the story of Mary and her extravagant act of praise and thanksgiving. There were those around, including fellow believers, who disapproved of her generous heart, but she continued to pour out her love to Jesus regardless. Mary and her family have so much to teach us about living a life of praise and thanksgiving.

Our Scripture today is taken from John 12:1-11 but is also paralleled in Matthew 26:1-13 and Mark 14:3-9. Between the Gospel accounts we discover that Jesus was at the house of the healed leper Simon, with Mary, Martha, Lazarus and the disciples. The names Mary and Simon appear in a similar story in Luke 7:36-50 but it is important to note that these are not different accounts of the same event! In our story, the woman at the feet of Jesus is Mary, the one who frustrated her sister as she busily prepared a meal. Mary's heart was built to worship, to express love and to pour out her thanksgiving to Jesus. In this story we see her doing exactly that.

'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' honour. Martha served, while Lazarus was among those reclining at the table with him.

Then Mary took about half a litre 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.' (John 12:1-3)

Mary and Martha are most well known for their encounter with Jesus in Luke 10:38-41 where they hosted a house full of guests. Martha rushed around exhausting every last ounce of her gift of hospitality, and spotted her sister Mary kneeling at the feet of Jesus. Understandably annoyed at the lack of help, she complained to Jesus and received an unexpected response.

"Martha, Martha,' the Lord answered, 'you are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed – or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.'" (Luke 10:41-42)

Mary sat at the feet of Jesus, focused on what he said and listened to his teaching. All other distractions were ignored as her full attention remained on Jesus. Fast forward to Simon's living room and Mary is still at the feet of Jesus – but what is her sister doing? Is she still complaining to Jesus? No! Martha continues to serve, because that's how God made her, but this time she's happy to see her sister worshipping in her own way. As they look across at their brother Lazarus, reclining at the table, their hearts are filled with thanksgiving.

Why are they so thankful?

Not long before the meeting at Simon's house a miracle had occurred. After narrowly escaping death in Jerusalem, Jesus and the disciples went beyond the Jordan River to avoid the authorities. It was here that Jesus was sent word, from Mary and Martha, that his friend Lazarus was sick. Telling the disciples that Lazarus' illness would not end in death, Jesus stayed in the area another two days. He then decided it was time to return to Judea to be with Lazarus. But returning to this area was dangerous, and the disciples reasoned that if Lazarus was 'sleeping' then why did his illness warrant Jesus taking such a risk?

'So then he told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead, and for your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him."' (John 11:14)

By the time he made the journey to Bethany, Lazarus had been dead for four days.

'When Mary arrived and saw Jesus, she fell at his feet and said, "Lord if only you had been here, my brother would not have died."' (John 11:32 NLT)

Even in that moment of intense grief, Mary's intimate relationship with Jesus was revealed. She was not afraid to show him her despair and stayed connected with him even in her darkest moments. Again, she fell at his feet. Jesus insisted that the stone of Lazarus' tomb was rolled away. Ever the practical one, Martha pointed out that the smell would be unpleasant.

'Jesus responded, "Didn't I tell you that you would see God's glory if you believe?" So they rolled the stone aside. Then Jesus looked up to heaven and said, "Father, thank you for

hearing me. You always hear me, but I said it out loud for the sake of all these people standing here, so that they will believe you sent me."' (John 11:40-42 NLT)

The aroma of Mary's perfume filled Simon's house on that day. It was an expression of love, thanksgiving and praise costing the equivalent of a year's wages. It was an extravagant gift of love – but not everyone was impressed!

As Judas looked on, his anger grew. Like many who like to criticise the gifts and offerings of others, he saw an opportunity to take the moral high ground and diminish Mary's offering.

'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.' (John 12:4-6)

Judas's criticism of Mary was the ultimate hypocrisy. His concern wasn't for the poor; he simply wanted to criticise her offering. Mary's gift angered Judas because it was selfless and extravagant. Mary didn't think about what she would get in return and there was no expectation that it would bring her further blessing. Jesus immediately knew what Judas was doing and highlighted it in front of the entire room.

"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."' (John 12:7-8)

We are privileged as Christians to enter God's presence every day. Each moment is an opportunity to express our praise and thanksgiving through worship and service like Mary and Martha. These expressions fill our surroundings with the fragrant love of Jesus.

'What Mary did was a blessing to Jesus and a blessing to the home, filling it with fragrance, and today, she is a blessing to the church around the world. Her one act of devotion in this little village of Bethany still sends "ripples of blessing."' (Warren Wiersbe)

Mary's generous discipleship comes from a heart of worship. Mary had discovered what was important and no one was going to take it away from her. Jesus calls us to take a step away from all the distractions and develop a heart dedicated to worship, a heart willing to give abundantly, a heart just like Mary's.

STARTERS

Choose one of the starters to share with your group.

GIFT OF THE GAB

Discuss the following questions as a group:

- **What's** the most extravagant gift you've ever received?
- **What's** the most sentimental gift you've ever received?
- **What's** the worst gift you've ever been given? Does the person know you don't like it?
- **If money** was no object, what gift would you buy for someone close to you?
- **What** gift can't money buy?

WORLD RECORD-BREAKING SCENTS

Try these questions relating to world record-breaking scents.

1. As of 2005, Clive Christian No.1 held the world record for being the most expensive perfume. How much do you think a 500ml bottle cost at the time?

- a) £115,000
- b) £157,000
- c) £205,000

2. The Australian director Baz Lurhmann created the most expensive fragrance advert for Chanel No.5 in November 2004. How much did it cost?

- a) £4.2 million
- b) £13 million
- c) £18 million

3. Madeline Albrecht spent her career testing products for Dr Scholl at Hill Top Research Laboratories. Approximately how many thousands of feet and armpits did she sniff during her career?

- a) 3,400
- b) 4,600
- c) 5,600

4. The Indonesian 'corpse flower' or *Amorphophallus Titanum* releases a foul stench when it flowers. Approximately how far can its pungent odour spread?

- a) *half a mile away*
- b) a mile away
- c) two miles away

5. The largest bottle of perfume was created in Croatia in 2019. How many litres was it?

- a) *616.18 litres*
- b) 714.2 litres
- c) 787.3 litres

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TODAY'S SPECIAL

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Today we are focusing on the following verse from Psalm 100:

'Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise; give thanks to him and praise his name.'
(Psalm 100:4)

Watch the teaching video to discover how this verse links with our theme for today - the story of the woman at Bethany.

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MAINS

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Mary, Martha and Lazarus were a close-knit family and had been through a lot together by the time we meet them again in John 12. Financially, they were in a comfortable position, as earlier in John's Gospel we discover they own their own property and are able to accommodate Jesus and the rest of his disciples. They're an average family who love Jesus and see their giving as an extension of that love. It would be easy for them to give the minimum, tick a box and get on with their lives. However, this family has a different view on giving.

Read John 12:1-3.

'Then Mary took about half a litre of pure nard, an expensive perfume...' (John 12:3).

According to the Office of National Statistics the average annual UK salary in 2021 was £38,600. For many families the amount is a lot less, but consider for a moment what your annual income is (you obviously don't need to share this with the group). Now imagine investing that amount of money on an expensive bottle of perfume.

- **How** would you feel taking the perfume and pouring it on Jesus' feet knowing how valuable it is?
- **Do you** think you would be able to do it? If so, why/why not?
- **Share** some examples of the modern-day equivalents to Mary's perfumed gift.
- **What's** your gut reaction when you think about giving a gift of this value to Jesus?

The aim of these questions is not to initiate a guilt trip but to consider just how extravagant Mary's gift to Jesus was.

'...she poured it on Jesus' feet and wiped his feet with her hair.' (John 12:3)

- **What** was the significance of Mary releasing her hair and using it to wipe the feet of Jesus?

It was against the convention of the time for women to wear their hair down, especially in a room full of men. Mary wasn't afraid to go against tradition to give her extravagant gift.

- **Have you** ever felt prompted to express your praise and thanksgiving in a way that others have struggled to understand? What did it feel like?
- **Have you** ever misunderstood the extravagant giving of someone else, seeing it as over-the-top or unnecessary? Why did you feel that way?
- **Is extravagant** giving part of your church culture? If not, then why do you think that is? What would it take for the culture in your church to change?

Read John 12:4-6.

Often leaders in the Church raise genuine concerns regarding the stewardship of God's resources. But this was not Judas's motivation. He was concerned about keeping the money for himself.

- **What** are some of the other negative motivations people may have for diminishing the gifts of others? These gifts may be time, talents or financial in nature.
- **Why** do you think people belittle the gifts of others?

When Mary shared her extravagant gift, the whole room filled with the beautiful scent of her perfume.

- **Share** a time when you were blessed by witnessing someone express their thanksgiving and praise to God.

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DESSERT
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Today we have explored a story demonstrating extravagant love for Jesus.

- **Can you** see expressions of that kind of extravagant love for Jesus in your own life? **What** does that look like for you?
- **What** would our church be like if we entered into the presence of God with a heart like Mary's?

The Salvation Army's Founder, William Booth, understood the importance of giving ourselves completely to God. What is your response to the following quote?

'Will you go to his feet and place yourself entirely at his disposal?' (William Booth)

- **As you** reflect on today's session, what one gift could you offer to show your extravagant love for Jesus?

PRAYER

Dear God,
We come into your presence just as Mary did, with our hearts full of praise and thanksgiving.
Guide us to places in our lives where we have held back from you, and prompt us to give abundantly.
Amen.

SIDES

The *'Sides'* and *'For Sharing'* courses provide additional activities that can be used as part of the main session or at another time. Ideally these would be used after the *'Mains'* course of the main session.

ABUNDANT GIVING

In the clip ['Giving Will Change Your Life'](#), Pastor Francis Chan shares his experience of abundant giving.

- **What** is your response to Francis Chan's experience of giving?
- **Can you** imagine making a commitment to give like that in your own life?

PRAISE YOU IN THE STORM

Prior to gathering in Bethany, Mary and Martha experienced the devastating loss of their brother Lazarus.

Read John 11:17-32.

- **How** did the two sisters demonstrate their faith in Jesus and their love for him despite the challenging circumstances?
- **How** do times of difficulty impact our ability to praise God and give thanks to him?
- **How** do our personal circumstances impact our willingness to give to God our time, talents or finances?

When we are in the middle of a storm it can be challenging to enter God's courts with praise and thanksgiving.

Spend some time in prayer and reflection as you listen to Natalie Grant's song ['Praise you in this storm.'](#)

FOR SHARING

RIPPLES OF BLESSING

‘What Mary did was a blessing to Jesus and a blessing to the home, filling it with fragrance, and today, she is a blessing to the church around the world. Her one act of devotion in this little village of Bethany still sends “ripples of blessing”.’ (Warren Wiersbe)

Mary’s act of generosity spilled into her surroundings and continues to impact the lives of believers today. There were those watching on who viewed her extravagant gesture as pointless and a waste of resources, but Jesus didn’t see it that way.

Reflecting on Mary’s offering, discuss as a group ways to create a fragrant gift to share with the church and the local community. Decide what you will make, set a budget and put a date in the diary to gather together and make the gifts. These could be distributed as part of the final celebrations for the Generous Discipleship programme.

Here are some ideas to get you started (found on Pinterest):

- Bath bombs
- Scented candles
- Flowers
- Perfume
- Scented play-dough
- Cleaning products
- Scented play-dough bubble bath
- Fruit teas
- Car air fresheners

You may get some funny looks as you distribute your gifts but remember that you’re in good company!

BACKGROUND MUSIC

Listed below there is a selection of music that fits with the theme of today’s session.

- **Pour My Love on You** - Phillips, Craig and Dean
- **At the Feet of Jesus** - Christy Nockels

SALVATION ARMY SONGBOOK

337. ‘I will enter his gates with thanksgiving in my heart’

345. ‘To be in your presence’

572. ‘At thy feet I bow adoring’

599. ‘Kneeling before thee, Lord, I am praying’

600. ‘Kneeling in penitence’

602. ‘Lord, I make a full surrender’

635. ‘When the music fades’

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Takeaway!

A psalm. For giving grateful **PRAISE**.

SHOUT for joy to the Lord, all the earth.

WORSHIP the Lord with gladness; come before him with joyful songs.

KNOW that the Lord is God. It is he who made us, and we are his; we are his people, the sheep of his pasture.

ENTER his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise; give thanks to him and praise his name.

For the Lord is good and his **LOVE** endures for ever; his faithfulness continues through all generations.

(Psalm 100: 1–5)

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