

MARY OF BETHANY – EMPTYING OURSELVES AT JESUS’ FEET

JONATHAN BALDWIN

I. OUR HEARTS BEING FILLED WITH THE LOVE OF GOD

- A. Turn to Luke 10. One of Jesus’ friends has really stood out to me over the years as I have read the Gospels. Mary lived in the town of Bethany with her sister Martha and her brother Lazarus. They seemed to be people that He visited often even spending some of his last moments at their home (John 12).
- B. Luke is the first one to tell her story. Before we read her story let’s take a quick stop a few verses before as Luke has just recounted Jesus’ parable of the Good Samaritan in response to a Jewish law expert who was trying to get out of the second commandment by saying “who is my neighbor?” I think it’s not an accident it is right before Mary and Martha’s story. They are certainly connected. After the man has been robbed and left for dead, Luke 10:33 tells us, “But a Samaritan, who was on a journey, came upon him; and when he saw him, he felt compassion”.
1. The Greek word, *splanchnízomai* (*splangkhnid'-zom-ahee*), translated as “compassion” here means that the Samaritan’s heart was so filled with love for this man—likely his enemy—that his body literally hurt¹.
 2. Have you ever felt that deep of love? Such deep compassion that makes your body ache?
 3. In 2009, I spent two and a half months in Haiti, the poorest nation in the Western Hemisphere. I left the missions base I was staying at to buy a cell phone from a street vendor so I could call my girlfriend in the US (now my wife, Theresa). Lining the streets were merchants carrying everything from picturesque paintings to hand crafted bowls to second hand clothes from our American surplus. I finally eyed the merchant who had what I needed. With my Haitian translator, I began to negotiate the price of the phone hoping to get a good deal. In the midst of negotiation, a boy about twelve years interrupted asking me for money. I told him “no” and continued my negotiations. With bloodshot eyes revealing a young man who had not slept well many, many nights in a row, or worse was addicted to drugs, the boy refused to relent begging me for money. Suddenly, a man came from the side and began hitting the boy. I was horrified. What was happening? How could someone hit a twelve-year-old boy? My heart broke for him. After buying the phone, feeling guilt of my great prosperity, I bought some peanut butter for the boy and looked for him but could not find him. As we drove away, I found another street kid and gave him the peanut butter. At that point, we had trouble navigating the city street as needy street kids mobbed our vehicle. I was rebuked for putting our team in danger. I returned to the missions base with *splanchnízomai* as my heart hurt with the depth of compassion I still wanted and needed in my heart for the poor. My body hurt with so much pain.
- C. Jesus asks them in 10:36, “Which of these three do you think proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell into the robbers' hands?”

¹ <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/g4697/nasb95/mgnt/0-1/>

- D. This Jewish law “expert” responds but it’s interesting the word choice he uses, ““The one who showed mercy toward him.” This man who had already had an “M.O.” of trying to make the Jewish law less potent to himself uses the more common (and less potent) word *eleos*. It’s like he heard the story but missed the point.

II. EXTRAVAGENT LOVE IN MARY’S HEART FOR JESUS

- A. It’s not an accident that the very next story is Mary and Martha’s story. It begins in Luke 10:38. Jesus has just told them, “Go and do the same” telling the people there to share His great compassion to their neighbors just like the Samaritan had.

38 Now as they were traveling along, He entered a village; and a woman named Martha welcomed Him into her home. 39 She had a sister called Mary, who was seated at the Lord's feet, listening to His word. 40 But Martha was distracted with all her preparations; and she came up {to Him} and said, "Lord, do You not care that my sister has left me to do all the serving alone? Then tell her to help me." 41 But the Lord answered and said to her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and bothered about so many things; 42 but {only} one thing is necessary, for Mary has chosen the good part, which shall not be taken away from her."

- B. I have no doubt this sermon impacted both of them in a deep way (though differently). The first thing you see is Martha “welcoming” Jesus (and I’m sure lots of people that were with him) into her home. This is a big deal. Can you imagine in our modern day having like 20-30 people (maybe more) into your home and how much work that would be. Now think about it in *her* day. Imagine the amount of work that must have gone on and then is even going on once they are there (gathering water—walking all the way to the well and back, killing some chickens then plucking every single feather off of them, cooking all day long without air conditioning and maybe all of this in the rain? Who knows?) Point is this was a huge undertaking for Martha (you see an example of this in the scene of The Chosen with Peter’s wife and how much work it was! Remember how overwhelmed she was?)
1. Martha responds to Jesus’ needs with *eleos*. She really wanted to show mercy to him and those that were with him.
 2. Mary goes and sits at Jesus’ feet as her heart ached within her with *splanchnízomai*. Just like the Good Samaritan, her heart was beginning to respond in extravagance. Deep love was growing on the inside of her.
- C. I picture Martha stressed for sure but really in her heart seeking to respond to the word that she had heard from Jesus and express love and care for him just like the Samaritan did. I imagine Mary helping Martha—really helping her hard—but once Jesus was in the door she stopped helping. I guess we don’t know for sure but this is how I picture this. Scripture certainly never calls her lazy (quite the opposite).
- D. When Jesus gets in the door, she *also* wants to express that same love that Martha did except the way *she* does it is by sitting at His feet and listening to what He has to say—she wants to really know Him. Martha gets upset because her helper has left her. She starts fuming as she is in there cooking while her sister is sitting down (I’ve never done that before!).

- E. There was likely even another cultural dynamic going on here as well. In Jesus’ day women would not have been allowed to learn from a Rabbi. Jesus is turning this on its head and telling all who were there—no, women can hear the Word too.
- F. Martha is pretty bold with Jesus. She orders him, “***Lord, do You not care that my sister has left me to do all the serving alone? Then tell her to help me.***”
1. First, she accuses Jesus of not caring about her. Something inside of her is saying, “Jesus do you see me? Do you see all that I am doing? I am serving you! See?!!”
 2. Second, she orders Jesus to tell her sister to help her.
 3. The main issues Martha likely had here are 1) offense with Jesus and her sister 2) she was judging Mary’s response to Jesus thinking she should be doing something different 3) she did not believe that Jesus saw her.
- G. Jesus tells Martha that she is “***worried and bothered about so many things***” but that only “***one thing is necessary***”.
1. In our deep desire to please Jesus and follow Him we often end up worried and bothered by many things.
 2. Apart from Jesus we can do nothing. Ultimately only one thing is necessary. The one thing necessary is abiding in the vine (John 15) by sitting at Jesus’ feet like Mary and listening to His voice (through the Holy Spirit inside of us and meditation on His Word).
- H. Jesus tells Martha that Mary has “has chosen the good part”. In other words, “Martha, why would I tell her to stop sitting at My feet? Why would I stop her from this good thing that she is giving herself to?”
1. My favorite phrase is when Jesus says that it “***shall not be taken away from her.***”
 2. Can you imagine having something that will never fade, that transcends death and can never be taken away from you?
 - a. There’s really nothing like that in this age—our health can be taken from us, we perceive our beauty fading with age, relationships come and go, our favor is like a Ferris wheel—one moment we are up then another we are down.
 - b. But there *is* something that will *never* fade—will never be taken away from us:
38 For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, 39 nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. Romans 8:38-39

III. LAZARUS – MARY AND MARTHA WALK OUT OFFENSE WITH GOD

A. Turn to John 11. Mary and Martha’s journey in her relationship with Jesus continues in John 11. Suddenly Mary’s brother gets really sick to the point he is near death.

1. Martha and Mary were confident in Jesus’ love for their brother sending word to him, “Lord behold, he whom You love is sick.”
2. John was also confident in this love telling us in verse 5. But Jesus shows that love in a way that might seem strange to us:

5 Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. 6 So when He heard that he was sick, He then stayed two days {longer} in the place where He was. John 11:5,6

3. Because Jesus loved the three of them so much, he stayed two days longer-long enough for Lazarus to die.

B. When Jesus finally did come, the first one to come to Jesus was Martha. John records specifically that Mary “stayed at the house”.

21 Martha then said to Jesus, "Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died. 22 "Even now I know that whatever You ask of God, God will give You." 23 Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." 24 Martha said to Him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." 25 Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me will live even if he dies, 26 and everyone who lives and believes in Me will never die. Do you believe this?" 27 She said to Him, "Yes, Lord; I have believed that You are the Christ, the Son of God, {even} He who comes into the world." John 11:21-27

1. Martha is hurting. Deeply. She had sent word to Jesus that her brother was dying but Jesus didn’t come. But at the same time she is confident in His power. But at the same time she doesn’t want to hope in the immediate resurrection of her brother—I know He will rise again...on the last day.”
2. Jesus tells Martha that He Himself is the resurrection.
3. When Jesus asks her if she believes, Martha does something amazing—she confesses that Jesus is the Son of God! John omits Peter’s confession in His Gospel and tells us Martha’s confession instead (Peter’s is recorded in all three of the other Gospels).

C. Then Martha goes back to Mary and tells her that Jesus wants to see her. Mary gets up right away and goes to see Jesus. All this John tells us was done in secret to avoid not only the crowds but also the very present threat against Jesus’ life. But it doesn’t quite work out that way as a crowd ends up following Mary to the tomb.

32 Therefore, when Mary came where Jesus was, she saw Him, and fell at His feet, saying to Him, "Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died." 33 When Jesus therefore saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her {also} weeping, He was deeply moved in spirit and was troubled, 34 and said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to Him, "Lord, come and see." 35 Jesus wept. -John 11:32-35

- D. First off, we see Mary again, “at His feet”. The three times Mary is mentioned in Scripture she is always at Jesus’ feet.
- E. This whole sequence of events is so revealing of Jesus’ heart. Mary says the exact same thing to Him that Martha did, “If you had been here my brother would not have died.” When Jesus sees all of them weeping He is deeply troubled and weeps with them.
1. One of the greatest realities of the Incarnation is that we have a God who weeps with us. He didn’t just stay up in Heaven with His Father but became a man and wept with Martha and Mary when their brother died.
 2. It is comforting to know that when we are in pain, when we are experiencing injustice against us, when those around us are sick or die, Jesus is at that grave deeply moved on the inside, weeping with us.
- F. There was no doubt. Even the Jews who were at the grave that day acknowledged, **“See how much He loved him!”**
1. Jesus’ heart was ripped open with pain. As he looked on his friends that he loved so much no doubt an apt word for it would be *splanchnízomai*. Deep on the inside God was so moved.
 2. If He loved Him, then why? Could not this Man who opened the eyes of the blind kept this man Lazarus from dying?
 3. Offense with God is epidemic in the human experience. It is so easy to find yourself there. Usually when we are offended with people underneath that offense is ultimately offense with God. However, offense will destroy our relationships and ultimately extinguish our love for God.
 4. It’s amazing too how these people were offended on Mary and Martha’s behalf, “Could not this man, who opened the eyes of the blind man, have kept this man also from dying?” (John 11:37) We often are offended at God’s leadership in other people’s lives.
 5. But remember the beginning—when Jesus heard Lazarus was dying *because* He loved this family He stayed where He was.
 6. We are always missing the whole picture of Jesus’ perfect leadership. Faith is believing in *Who He is* despite our circumstances.

- G. Of course, you all know what happens next. Jesus does the unthinkable, He raises a man from the dead that surely did smell but God puts life back in that decomposing body and a man wrapped in grave clothes walks out of that grave fully alive.

IV. MARY EMPTIES HERSELF AT JESUS’ FEET

- A. The next story of Mary Anointing Jesus’ feet seems to have been very important to the early apostles. Three of the four Gospels record it. John 11:2 gives us an indicator that it was so well-known what Mary had done that John identifies Mary “as the one that had anointed Jesus”. In other words, most of his audience already knew this story.
1. In Matthew and Mark’s account, Jesus prophesies that wherever the Gospel is preached what this woman did that day would be told.
 2. It is likely that the 11 apostles hearing this took this as an apostolic directive from the Chief Apostle Himself and told this story everywhere they took the Gospel. Somehow, in 2023, 2000 years later, we have lost the value of what Mary did. Maybe we are also worried and bothered by many other things when one thing is necessary?
- B. This story is so precious to me. I was marked by what Mary did when I was 16 and the longing to pour myself out at Jesus’ feet has only grown ever since.
- C. Several years ago, I carefully took the three Gospel accounts and after deleting duplicate details made a unified account, a harmony of all three stories. I’d like to share that with you today:

Mary of Bethany

Introduction

Jesus, therefore, six days before the Passover, came to Bethany where Lazarus was, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. So they made Him a supper there at the home of Simon the leper, and Martha was serving; but Lazarus was one of those reclining at the table with Him.

Mary Anoints Jesus

Mary then took an alabaster vial filled with a pound of very costly perfume of pure nard. She broke the vial and poured it over His head. She anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped His feet with her hair; and the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.

The People’s Response to Her Extravagance

But the disciples and those gathered were indignantly remarking to one another, “Why has this perfume been wasted?” And they were scolding her. Judas Iscariot, one of His disciples, who was intending to betray Him, said, “Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and given to poor people?” Now he said this, not because he was concerned about the poor, but because he was a thief, and as he had the money box, he used to pilfer what was put into it.

Jesus’ Response to Her Extravagance

But Jesus, aware of this, said to them, “Leave her alone. Why do you bother the woman? For she has done a good deed to Me. For you always have the poor with you, and whenever you wish you can do good to them; but you do not always have Me. For when she poured this perfume on My body, she did it to prepare Me for burial. So that she may keep it for the day of My burial. She has done what she could. Truly I say to you, wherever this gospel is preached in the whole world, what this woman has done will also be spoken of in memory of her.”

- D. Six days before Jesus is going to die, he goes to Bethany (essentially a suburb of Jerusalem) the same city that Mary, Martha and Lazarus live in.
 - 1. It says something about the relationship Jesus had with this family that he wanted to spend his final days with them.
- E. While he is in Bethany, he visits the home of Simon the Leper. Probably this man used to be a leper but had been healed by Jesus. Simon, perhaps to show his gratitude, has a dinner at his house for Jesus and those with Him. Martha finds her way again into the kitchen serving Jesus there and Lazarus is sitting at the table with him.
- F. Then, Mary takes an alabaster vial filled with a pound of very costly perfume. Nard is produced from a flowering plant in the honeysuckle family which grows in the Himalayas of Nepal, China, and India². The flower is found at an altitude of 9,800–16,400 ft. So, not only would it have come from over 2892 miles away, it would have been extremely difficult to bring down from such a height. Later Judas informs us that this perfume was worth an entire year’s wages. I’m sure now you can imagine why.
 - 1. Luke 7:36-50 records another account of an anointing of Jesus’ head by a sinful woman expressing gratitude for Jesus forgiving her. This anointing had taken place earlier in Jesus’ ministry (Mary of Bethany’s anointing takes place right before Jesus dies).
 - 2. Perhaps Mary had heard about this anointing and thought to herself, “I have perfume!” Many have theorized that this was her inheritance left to her by her parents. She decides to do something so extravagant, so wasteful overflowing from splanchnízomai—she pours it out—not just some of the perfume—but completely empties it all—her entire inheritance—on Jesus.

² <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spikenard>