

# “Extravagant Worship”

Isaiah 43:19-21 & John 12:1-8

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Have you ever struggled getting a person you love the perfect gift? A gift that somehow shows, represents and symbolizes your unending love and devotion. Leslie can tell you that I am a poor gift giver. Like the time for our anniversary I thought I planned the perfect romantic backpacking trip together. I visualized us watching the sun set from a beautiful summit. Instead, it poured down rain almost the entire trip. Leslie has a tremendous fear of snakes. A rattlesnake slithered within a few feet of her. To top it all off, as we were hiking out we encountered a talkative nude male hiker.

I can identify with Mary’s dilemma. Mary loves Jesus. She is doing her best to be a faithful disciple and striving to live his teachings and examples. She wants to give an extravagant gift that shows she is a fully-committed disciple. But what do you get the man who has everything, Jesus, the Son of God?

John uses deliberate details to accentuate Mary’s extravagant worship. The perfume’s weight. Its purity. The conversion of Mary’s own hair into a servant’s foot towel. Mary’s act of worship was carefully planned. She spent her entire life savings amounting to \$60,000 in today’s value. She risked being robbed as she went to trade for nard, a perfumed ointment imported from the Himalayas. Nard was uncommon and outrageously expensive, but she managed to get it. Next, she had to get past the Sanhedrin who had given an order that even if anyone knew where Jesus was, they must report him immediately. Failure to report was a punishable crime. She made it to Jesus with every cent of her monetary assets in a bottle of expensive perfume. The use of cheap scented oil poured on the head was common at that time. Mary poured her expensive perfume on Jesus’ feet in an act of humility showing the greatest possible devotion. Enduring glaring looks, she further glorified Jesus by wiping the oil on Jesus feet with her hair. A Jewish lady was never to unbind her hair in public. Mary knew she was risking her life, and people would mock her for her extravagant worship.

Our scripture makes it clear that there was a huge cost and sacrifice in Mary’s extravagant worship. Mary shows that loving worship is never afraid to give too much. If you lived back, would you risk your life, give every cent you had, kneel down at Jesus’ feet, and then apply perfume to his feet with your own hair? Mary gave all she had in beautiful extravagant worship of God.

The Sanhedrin were trying to kill Jesus and his disciples. Lazarus has just been raised from the dead and is sitting at the table. Yet what stuck out in everyone’s mind concerning this evening was Mary’s extravagant worship. Not the risen Lazarus, not the bravery of Jesus’ friends. What the disciples remembered and wrote about long after was Mary’s extravagant worship that we are to follow. John says, “And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume,” which is a connection to a rabbinic saying meaning this example of extravagant worship will be spoken throughout the entire world and all should try to emulate it.

The Westminster Catechism, which is found in The Presbyterian Constitution, begins by stating, “A person’s chief and highest end is to glorify God, and fully to enjoy God forever.” We are at our best when we are extravagantly worshipping God.

In the book, *The Christian Life*, Michael Lindvall writes, “People often seem to imagine that worship is entertainment, therapy, education or some blending of the three. The insufficiency of each of these categories lies in the fact that they are facing in the wrong direction. Each is oriented toward entertaining, healing or educating, the worshipper. But the spiritual vector of worship ought to be in exactly the opposite direction toward God. At its most profound worship is nothing but a deliberate and repeated activity in which we are called to turn away from self and turn toward God. Worship is nothing less than an attempt to set the order of creation aright. The creature owns their creaturehood. Honest confession is spoken. Praise is offered. The worshiper surrenders their pretense to be a god; all turn in adoration to the One who is God. In this dramatic enactment of the fundamental “Rightness” of things lies transformation and restoration. Life edges into proper

balance. We are free to be who we are—no more but no less. We discover the liberation that comes with being forgiven and accepted by both God and neighbor. We are freed from the pretense of autonomy and invulnerability. We no longer imagine that we have to be in control of everything. Worship is no less than weekly rehearsal for the right order of things. The indirect result of this reordering of the moral universe, its by-product if you will, is the nurturing of the worshiper toward integrity, wisdom and joy. This integrity is more than health. This wisdom is more than education. And this joy is so much more than entertainment. But if worship pursues any of these goals directly, it will miss the mark, if only because it is headed 180 degrees in the wrong direction. If you and I enter worship facing anywhere but toward God, the experience may please us. It may inform us, it may comfort us, but it will hardly transform us. Worship that poses you no risk is something else. Worship that does not make you anxious once and again, worship that fails to stretch your mind and spirit to the edge of discomfort, is something less than worship. And if worship is no more, look first to yourself and ask this question: In what direction am I facing?" These are the words of Michael Lindvall on how to live the Christina life.

Soren Kierkegaard said basically the same thing 150 years ago. He pointed out that many suffer from role confusion in worship. We view the congregation as an audience, the pastor as a performer, and God as the prompter. For one to worship they must flip this notion around. The congregation are the actors, the minister is a prompter, and God is the audience.

The question one should ask when leaving church is not what did I get out of worship; rather, what did I give in worship? What did I let go of in worship? What burden did I drop at the foot of the cross? What pride did I shed? What gnawing anger, fault, fear, or sin am I going home without? What lie do I no longer believe? Did I give my all, my very best, in glorifying God today? Did I give sacrificially? Was my worship extravagant?

Mary worshiped extravagantly. It appears that Mary was the only one that understood Jesus when he explained that he must die for our sins and rise from the dead. Peter was perhaps the second closest to understanding for he declared that Jesus was God, the Messiah, but he responded that Jesus must never die then drew his sword to fight off those who came to arrest Jesus. Mary knew Jesus was God, understood and worshipped God extravagantly. How did Mary know? She worshipped. Repeatedly, Mary was at the feet of Jesus learning from Jesus and worshipping God. Mary's worship was humble, extravagant, and loving with the proper orientation. She was not self-centered. She was God-centered.

Mary's worship involved turning from self and sacrificially giving. Mary humbly knelt on shaking knees to wash Jesus' feet. With nervous sweaty palms she poured out all she had becoming God-centered as she rubbed in the ointment with her hair. Mary's extravagant worship showed great humility and great devotion, her entire focus was upon God.

Judas objected, "Why wasn't this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year's wage." Judas was focused upon himself, his group, his community. Judas was concerned about what he could get from Jesus; healing, power, influence, safety, money, security, peace of mind etc.

Our scripture challenges us with this contrast. Are you more like Mary, an extravagant worshipper? Or are you more like Judas following Jesus because of what you get from God, coming to church for the benefits you receive, and critical of those who prefer a different way of worship. Judas cared the most about his own well-being. Mary gave her all in love. Judas sought to turn attention from Jesus. Mary sought to turn attention to Jesus. Judas was worship-less. Mary was an extravagant worshipper. So, are you more like Judas or Mary? Ponder before you answer. Mary gave her most-valued possession. What is your most valued possession? Are you willing to freely give your most-valued possession to Jesus? Do you humbly give your very best in worship? Do you freely give sacrificially of your time, money and talents to God? Do you come to church with your focus on all that you will give to God and others? Or do you come to church for the love, care, and feeling you get from being here?

Resist comfortable worship, coming to get something out of worship. Instead, give your all. Pour out your life in extravagant worship. Some say worship is foolish. It is a waste of time, throwing away what one has worked for and in a sense this is true. Loving God with all of your heart, soul, and mind, transforms you into the person you were created to become. True worship enables you to love and be loved. True worship emits a wonderful aroma drawing others to God and blessing everyone around them. Worship involves bold risks to give all of yourself and all you have to glorify God. When was the last time someone was shocked by your

worship to the point that they objected saying you are giving too much? Right now, your heart should be racing, your knees knocking, your palms sweating and your heart bursting with love as you pour out to Jesus your all; as you glorify God with the gifts that you have eagerly prepared to give God today.

Today's scripture gives us two extreme examples. There is a mixture of both Judas and Mary in all of us. How will you strive to worship more like Mary? Worship is a shift in lifestyle, being God-centered instead of self-centered, desiring to give rather than receive. Worship is striving to glorify and enjoy God forever. Do not be afraid to love freely, to move out of your comfort zone, to abandon self, to give everything. True love is risky. Love God boldly. Strive to be an extravagant worshiper. Amen