

A question for you as we begin: How much money does those in your household earn in a year? Or in other words, how much do you or your family have to live on for a year's time? I want you to have that figure in the back of your head. Imagine that you had been able to save that amount and have it setting in a bank amount freely at your disposal.

Perhaps you had scrimped and saved for a number of years.

You have sacrificed and lived modestly to accrue this amount of money whether it is 25, 50, 100, or 150,000 dollars. The time has come and now you are going to do something with this money.

If it was you, what would you do? What comes to mind? Buy a new car or a boat; go on your dream vacation; put your kids through college;

pay down your mortgage or renovate your home; put money down on the 2<sup>nd</sup> home you had always dreamed of at the lake, mountains or beach; support a charity dear to your heart; go on a wild shopping spree; invest it.

What would you do with that kind of money? The possibilities seem endless.

In our gospel lesson today this is the dilemma that Mary faces.

She has a year's worth of wages setting on a shelf in her home.

What could she do with that amount of money? She could certainly feed Lazarus, Martha, and herself and pay for any of their expenses.

She could ensure they lived more comfortably than the average resident of Bethany. She could have given the money to help the poor as Judas suggested. And although I'm sure she didn't have the wealth of choices of where to spend the money as we do in our day, I have no doubts there were plenty of ways to spend it.

Would you ever dream of doing something like this? Mary takes a bottle of costly perfume made of pure nard and poured it over Jesus' feet.

She took a bottle of \$100,000 perfume and anointed Jesus.

All of it would be spent on him now and later for his burial. \$100,000 spent entirely on Jesus. What on earth would compel her to do such a thing?

What is her motivation? Was she trying to buy her way in to become Jesus' favorite disciple? Was she in some way trying to show up the other disciples by her actions? We have no record of any of the other disciples doing something so extravagant.

However my sense of Mary from this story is that she does not seem aware of the other disciples at all. She is fully engaged in an intimate interaction with Jesus kneeling at his feet. Everything else surrounding her was not

important at the moment. She was focused solely on her Lord.

You get the sense she would have done the same thing if no one else had been in the room. It is reminiscent of another scene at the home of Mary and Martha where Mary sits at Jesus' feet.

On that occasion, she is so engrossed in what Jesus is saying that she is oblivious to all that poor Martha is having to do to prepare the meal.

Her motivation may have had something to do with what happened in the chapter just before this in the gospel of John. In the 11<sup>th</sup> chapter of John Lazarus is very ill and by the time that Jesus arrives he has already been dead for four days.

The entire community is distraught over Lazarus, particularly Mary and Martha. Jesus himself is even moved to tears over the death of his friend.

So Jesus goes to Lazarus' tomb and commands the dead man to come out.

Lazarus comes back to life because of the power of Jesus.

Mary was certainly devoted to Jesus prior to this event, but after he gives her her brother back, she is completely devoted to him. No act can fully express her gratitude, her thankfulness, her devotion to Jesus for all he has done for her. And so she bestows on him this extremely extravagant gift.

I'd like to think that I am as devoted to Jesus as Mary was, that my motivations are always that pure. However I know better than that.

In looking at St. Paul's own list of bragging rights in our second lesson for today, I can see how easy it is to turn my life devoted to following Jesus into something that ultimately benefits me. My having read the entire Bible can be a source of pride. I can think that my having my daily time of prayer makes me more holy than other people. I can convince myself that the reason that God loves me is because of what I do in teaching Sunday School, singing in a choir, helping with Coffeehouse, going on mission trips or coming to worship.

We can even do this on a congregational level. We are so proud of our youth program and that we have 50 to 60 youth involved with Heartsong.

We take great pride in our ministry with developmentally delayed adults and our connection with our sister parish in Mnene, Zimbabwe.

We are thrilled that we have 17 adults from our congregation on their way to Ocean Springs, Mississippi this morning to help rebuild after the devastation from Hurricane Katrina.

We can look at this and get all puffed up about it.

Look at how great we are; how much better we are than other churches.

St. Paul would look at this and say that it is all rubbish. All of this means nothing. It has absolutely no value on its own. Without Jesus everything that we do is worthless. Paul says that he regards everything as loss compared to the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus. He regards it as rubbish, in order that he may gain Christ and be found in him.

Without Christ we are like the parched ground of the wilderness where nothing can grow. With Jesus we have a God who can make rivers flow in the desert. Like a mighty torrent, his goodness rushes over the thirsty ground in our lives and makes our desert places green with abundant life.

We look at this gospel story and are tempted to think that Mary is the one doing extravagant things. Mary is the one who is giving an incredible and lavish gift. To a degree that is right, but not compared to what Jesus is doing.

In the gospel of John alone, just look at the lavish and extravagant things that Jesus does. At Cana, Jesus turns 180 gallons of water into new wine, an amount far more than any wedding party could possibly consume.

At the Sea of Galilee, he turns 5 loaves and 2 fish into a feast that feeds over 5000 people and then has over twelve baskets of food leftover.

When Peter and the others fish all night without a catch, Jesus tells him to put out his net one more time and immediately he pulls up an incredible catch of 153 fish. Right after Mary anoints Jesus' feet with this costly perfume, Jesus will ride into Jerusalem and prepare for his most extravagant gift in sacrificing his life for the sake of the world.

When we give our offering to the church, when we sing in a choir or serve on a ministry team or offer ourselves in any way to the work of the church, we give of ourselves to Jesus in response to all that our Lord has done for us. Jesus always acts first in our lives. Everything we do is always in response to how Jesus has already acted in our lives.

Our worship, our time, our giving our gifts are our ways of showing our thanks to the one who died for us and has given us our life.

These are acts of devotion. With them we offer Jesus our best.

We show our Lord how much we love him,  
how thankful we are for all that he has done for us.

When Mary anointed Jesus' feet with that perfume of nard,

she wiped his feet with her hair and the smell of the perfume filled the house.

No doubt the smell of that perfume remained on her hair for many days to come. So it is with us when we give to God out of our love and devotion.

The sweet scent of our heartfelt service lingers with us. It helps others know the goodness and the grace of our amazing God.

Mary's amazing gift is an incredible model to us of devotion to Jesus.

It is also a challenge to make our focus on Christ paramount above anything else, any other ulterior motivations.

May we fix our eyes on Jesus and give lavishly of ourselves, our time, and our possessions out of thanks for all that Jesus has done for us.