

Aroma of Love, Stench of Greed

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¹ Six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, where Lazarus lived, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. ² Here a dinner was given in Jesus' honor. Martha served, while Lazarus was among those reclining at the table with him. ³ Then Mary took about a pint 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.

⁴ But one of his disciples, Judas Iscariot, who was later to betray him, objected, ⁵ "Why wasn't this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year's wages." ⁶ 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. ⁷ "Leave her alone," Jesus replied. "It was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial. ⁸ You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me." —John 12:1-8

It's hard to dislodge the memory of a distinctive smell. Think of the most beautiful aroma you have ever experienced.

Now, think of the foulest and most disgusting odor you can remember. That little part of the brain that records smell does an incredible job, doesn't it?

Distinctive smells pervade the story of Jesus' anointing for burial. Let's pause to imagine the aromas and odors present in the home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus. There was the smell of the food, including freshly baked bread and perhaps barbecued fish.

If we had been guests at this dinner, as 21st century time-travellers, we would have immediately noticed the body odor. This was first-century Palestine—daily showers were not part of their culture, and neither was deodorant. We might have identified smells more common in a gymnasium locker room—stale body odor or dirty socks.



Eric Gill (1926). Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, UK.

But I want to call two specific smells to your attention: first, **the odor of death**. This smell may not have literally lingered in their small home, but it was certainly very much alive in the memories of Lazarus' resurrection, recorded in the previous chapter. He just spent four days, dead as a doornail, in a tomb.

During those four days, his corpse was decomposing and decaying. John tells us that Jesus ordered that the stone at the entrance to Lazarus' tomb to be taken away. Martha, who seemed to be the most practically minded of Lazarus' two sisters, reminded Jesus that removing the stone that sealed the tomb would release some awful odors.

Everyone present at this dinner knew Lazarus had been dead. Even if his body no longer reeked, those present at dinner who were there when he burst out of his tomb could still remember the unforgettable stench of death.

Moreover, even if they denied it, some knew that Jesus himself had been increasingly speaking of his own death, including Mary.

But death was not the only smell on the minds of those present. In John 12:3, we read that Mary introduced **another smell** to the dinner party when she anointed Jesus' feet with the oil of pure nard, an expensive imported oil made from a root found in the mountains of India. ***The pouring out of this expensive, aromatic oil is the central aroma and scent of our story.***

When Mary poured this oil on Jesus' feet, the fragrance overwhelmed all other scents—John says it filled the house. Pouring out this expensive oil was an extraordinary act of love and worship on the part of Mary—as was the extravagant, carefree act of taking down her hair and wiping the feet of Jesus. Generally, women in that time only took down their hair for their husbands, or when emotionally distracted as they mourned someone's death.

Mary's two actions were a symbolic demonstration of the most intimate kind of spiritual love—and of her grief that Jesus would soon die himself. Pouring out expensive, aromatic oil and letting down her hair depicted the extravagant, unrestrained and reckless love of Mary for Jesus, as well as anointing him in preparation for his burial.

Another attitude was present that day—in direct contrast with the extravagant love of Mary. **Judas, who would betray Jesus just a few days later, hypocritically criticized Mary's actions as stupid and wasteful,** because he claimed the oil could have been sold and given to the poor. Jesus responds, "Leave her alone. This is about my burial. You always have the poor with you—but you don't always have me."

Was this a calloused thing for Jesus to say? Didn't he care for the needs of the poor? Jesus wasn't addressing physical poverty—he was talking about extravagant spiritual love. In pouring out this expensive oil, Mary did a beautiful thing—she demonstrated her extravagant love for Jesus. But Judas could only condemn what he didn't understand. He never understood the grace of God, poured out by Jesus.

Allow me to paraphrase what I believe is the intent of Jesus' response to Judas: *"Mary is right and you are wrong Judas. Sure, this oil could have been sold and given to the poor. But, with you as our*

treasurer, is that what would have happened? Really, Judas? If you had an extra year's worth of wages in your purse right now, would the poor end up with it? Or would you siphon it off into your own slush fund? You are not concerned for the poor; you are concerned with fattening your own bank account."

What's the takeaway—what spiritual lesson can we "inhale" from Mary's extravagant love offering and from Judas' two-faced criticism of the love Mary poured out?

1) In just a few days, Jesus would pour out the love of God, without measure, on all mankind. God's love, demonstrated on the cross of Christ, was given lavishly and unconditionally, without any guarantee of gratitude from its human recipients.

Mary's love for Jesus was lavish, extravagant, unrestrained and reckless because it was the very love of God she had received. When God in Christ poured out his love for us on the cross, he didn't just pour out a few drops. The love poured

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out on the cross of Christ was far more than a few dabs of perfume behind our ears or on our wrists. He opened the windows of heaven in a torrential downpour of love.

2) Judas had no idea about this extravagant kind of love. Sure, it made far more human sense to use just a bit of this expensive oil on Jesus' feet and save most of it for later. But *Mary poured out all her love.* God's grace enabled Mary to give freely, to celebrate Jesus, to be generous and seem reckless to those who live life cautiously or greedily.

God's grace has been poured out lavishly, not dispensed cautiously or frugally—God's grace is extravagant, unrestrained and yes, even reckless. □

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