

“The Scent of Christmas” (John 12:1-8)

I think it's safe to say that by and large, men need a lot of help in finding that perfect, holiday gift. It isn't a talent that many men have. Sometimes the hints have to be especially large. Well, this morning I'd like to help all of the men present to discover the perfect gift for that special lady this Christmas. We all know that women love perfume. They love to smell nice. Perhaps men, you've bought perfume in the past. But I'm not talking about just any perfume. I'm talking about Clive Christian's Number 1. We all know the first question any man will ask before making a considerable purchase. "How much will it cost?" Well men, you will be relieved to know that Clive Christian's perfume only costs \$1700 for a one-ounce bottle! Just imagine how wonderful your wife (or your mother) will smell when she is wearing this perfume! You probably have that much under the cushions of your sofa! How many of you ladies would like a bottle of Clive Christian's? Men, take a look, because you have no excuses this year. Now you know what your wife wants for Christmas. All you have to do is go and get it!¹

I've just suggested what women might want this Christmas. I'm sure we've all spent time talking about what husbands, children, and loved ones want for Christmas. But what does Jesus want this Christmas? After all, it's His birthday we're celebrating. What would Jesus want? Notice, I did not ask, "What does Jesus want FOR Christmas," but "what does Jesus want THIS Christmas?" Because what Jesus wants from you and me this Christmas is exactly what He wants 365 days a year. It doesn't change! I believe that in John 12:1-8 we have the answer to this question. We see the answer through a gift that a woman gave to Jesus. "What does Jesus want this Christmas?" First...

1. Jesus Wants Wholehearted Worship (12:1-3). John 12 records the end of Jesus' public ministry.² In 12:1 John tells us that Jesus "came to Bethany." Bethany was a town just outside of Jerusalem where Jesus' friends, Lazarus, Martha, and Mary lived. John reminds us that Bethany was where Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead (11:38-46). In 12:2, Martha and the kitchen crew are busy preparing dinner while Jesus and Lazarus are reclining at the table. However, the home that they are in doesn't belong to Lazarus. Mark tells us that it was "the home of Simon the leper" (Mark 14:3). I mention this because it helps us better understand the scene. First of all, you would never eat dinner at a leper's house unless the leper had been healed. The fact that they were at Simon's house points to his healing. Simon literally owed his life to his guest. Lazarus also owed his life to Jesus. In John 11, where was Lazarus? In the tomb! So here we have two guys...each one "one-upping" the other with story after story. Simon talking about being made whole and Lazarus talking about being resurrected from a hole!

Then, all of a sudden, the scene changes. Mary takes a pound (16 oz) of "very costly³ perfume" and anoints Jesus' feet (12:3). Later in our story we learn that Judas thought he could sell the perfume for about 300 denarii (12:5). A denarius was one day's wage in Jesus' day (Matt 20:2). This means that this perfume was worth an entire year's salary for the average person!⁴ Based upon this figure the perfume was approximately 25 denarii per ounce. Now let's fast-forward into the future and give a conservative estimate for how much this perfume would cost today. If we take into account an annual salary of \$30,000, this computes to \$1200 per ounce! In Mary's day this must have been the most expensive perfume you could buy. Remember how much an ounce of Clive Christian's perfume costs (\$1700). Mary's perfume is in the same ballpark.

But Jesus wasn't impressed by the value of the perfume. Earlier Jesus saw a widow give two copper coins and said she gave more than all of the big temple donors. Had Mary had only \$30 to her name, instead of \$30,000, and had she taken that money and bought \$30 of perfume and poured it on Jesus' feet, He would have been just as impressed. Why? Jesus saw her heart! The size of the gift didn't matter. It was the fact that her gift was an expression of love from the heart.⁵ This Christmas, what Jesus wants is YOU. He wants your wholehearted worship.

When I think of Mary's gift, I imagine this liquid nard as being in a container similar to *Old Spice* aftershave. The first bottle of aftershave I ever received was *Old Spice*. My grandpa used *Old Spice* so I wanted to use it too. The *Old Spice* bottle is designed so that the lotion can be used a little at a time. It has a long, narrow neck with a small hole in the top, so that a few drops can be dispensed into the hands at each use. This was a safe and inexpensive way for me to become a man.

Mark tells us that Mary "broke the vial" (Mark 14:3). In Mary's case, breaking the vial signified that she gave all that she had! Every drop she poured on Jesus. Half would not do. She gave it all. Because she wanted Jesus to know how much she loved Him. Likewise, Jesus is not interested in half of your life. He's not interested in half of your ambition, or half your plans, or half your relationships, or half your material possessions, or half your bank account, or half your heart, or half your love. He wants everything. What will you give Jesus this Christmas? Will you give Him a remarkable musical talent, a brilliant mind, an athletic future, a vocation, a relationship? Will you give Him your whole heart?

We not only see Mary's love in the value of her gift, but also in the manner in which she gave it. John writes that Mary "**anointed the feet of Jesus.**" In biblical times, perfume and oil were placed upon the head (Luke 7:46). Mary was well aware of this fact. But she placed her perfume upon Jesus' feet.⁶ To pour perfume, especially expensive perfume, on someone's feet was extraordinary. Since people didn't wear socks in biblical times, feet inevitably got dirty as they walked about the dusty paths with open sandals.

Can you imagine what this must have been like for Mary? Jesus' feet were no different than our feet. They were dust-covered, cracked, hot, and smelly. It was a normal courtesy to provide water for the feet to be washed when guests came into one's house (Luke 7:44). But actually attending to the feet was a menial task, fit for a slave. In John 13, Jesus washes the feet of the disciples, demonstrating His desire to serve. This is what worship is. Worship is serving God by acknowledging His worth!

John also records that Mary "**wiped His feet with her hair.**" When Mary let her hair down she did what Jewish women never did in public (cf. Luke 7:38).⁷ She took her hair, considered the glory of a woman in biblical times (1 Cor 11:15), and she wiped the excess perfume from His feet. Wiping Jesus' feet with her hair demonstrates Mary's abject humility and personal commitment. She is also able to use her hair to wipe up the excess ointment, which would otherwise run onto the floor—a truly needless waste.

I like what John says next. "**The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.**" It wasn't long before everyone knew what had taken place. In every room of the home, that sweet aroma drifted. Because of one gift that one woman gave Jesus, everyone could tell! And so it is with the person who truly loves Christ. Everyone in his or her home will smell the spiritual aroma. And not only was the fragrance of that perfume upon the feet of Jesus and throughout the house, it also remained in Mary's hair. Everyone she came in contact with could smell the sacrifice of love she gave to Jesus Christ. Mary's sacrificial act continues to live on. The fragrance in the house soon vanished. But the fragrance of her devotion to Jesus has continued to inspire believers through the centuries.

Mary teaches us what real worship is all about! Ultimately, no other reason for worship will last. Mary didn't come to Jesus to hear a sermon. She didn't come to ask Jesus for something. She didn't come to fellowship with other believers. Mary came to Jesus simply to express her love and worship. If we worship merely to hear a message, what happens when the message doesn't meet our expectations? If we worship merely for fellowship, what happens when other Christians let us down? If we worship merely when we are troubled, what happens when life is going smoothly?

Did you know that Mary is center stage only three times in Scripture, and each time she is at Jesus' feet? In Luke 10:39, she sat at His feet to hear His word. In John 11:32, she knelt at His feet in sorrow over the

death of her brother, Lazarus. Here, in John 12:3, she brings her offering. What a wonderful place to be found...at Jesus' feet. What does Jesus want this Christmas? He wants wholehearted worship. This means He wants you to spend time with Him. This means that you cease being so busy. It means you do away with your self-reliant ways and say, "Jesus, this is your time of the year and I'm going to make time for you." You may want to make Jesus a present. You may want to write Him a letter or a poem. You may want to listen to an entire worship CD in one sitting and just bask in His presence. You may want to read the Christmas account as a family before you do anything associated with Christmas.

During the holidays, the question is always raised, "What are your plans?" Properly translated this means, WHO are you going to spend Christmas with? Wouldn't it be great if you and I replied, "This year, I'm going to spend my Christmas with Jesus." Through Mary we see that the gift Jesus longs for from you and me this Christmas is wholehearted worship. In 12:4-8, we see that...

2. Jesus Wants Honest Devotion (12:4-8). Not everyone was pleased with Mary's gift. Matthew tells us that the disciples were full of "indignation" (Matt 26:8). John informs us that their ringleader was Judas Iscariot. In 12:5, we read the very first words spoken by Judas recorded in Scripture. He said, "**Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and given to poor people?**" At first glance Judas' question sounds valid. What if that perfume was worth \$30,000 by today's standards? How many meals for the hungry could you buy for \$30,000? How many coats for the cold could you buy for \$30,000? How many homeless could be sheltered for \$30,000? His logic sounds compelling. If we are not careful, we too can have a Judas mentality (e.g., when your elderly parent wants to give a large sum of his/her inheritance to the Lord's work instead of you. When your child takes that Christmas gift that you spent a lot of money on and wants to give it to another child). Fortunately, John unmasks Judas' hypocrisy. In 12:6 he includes this commentary, "**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.**" The parallel accounts in Matthew and Mark seem to indicate that after this incident Judas went away immediately and made his deal with the Jewish authorities to deliver up Jesus. Losing out on one source of sordid gain, he immediately went out and set up another.

Judas couldn't love Jesus because he couldn't stop loving money. What is keeping you from loving Jesus? Like Judas, is it money? Or is it your interest in entertainment (e.g., video games, television, movies, music), family (e.g., time alone with family, over absorbed in one's children), or work (e.g., climb the ladder, be the best, find self-worth)?

In 12:7 Jesus defends Mary's actions by saying, "**Let her alone.**" No doubt, those present were expecting Jesus to reprimand Mary for her lavish gift. Yet, when Jesus saw the gift she gave dollars and cents didn't matter anymore. Jesus was too captured by her love to notice or care how much it cost! This suggests that sometimes in life dollars and cents just don't matter; a true love for God is what matters.

A year ago, my son Justin had ecoli. He and I were in Children's Hospital in Seattle for two weeks. The mortality rate for children two and under is 95%. During that time, money meant nothing to our family. We would have found any way possible to see Justin healed. Life is more valuable than the cost. The Bible says that worship that costs us nothing is not true worship (1 Chron 21:24).

Jesus goes on to say that Mary should be permitted to "**keep it [the perfume] for the day of My burial**" (12:7). By this Jesus means that Mary prepared His body for burial. The perfume that was applied six days prior to His death (12:1) would serve as a burial ointment.

It is interesting to note that Matthew records Jesus telling His disciples and all those gathered that He is about to be crucified (Matt 26:2), yet His words seem to fall on deaf ears. Everyone was sitting around eating, drinking, and chatting merrily. Hadn't anyone heard what Jesus said? Hadn't anyone understood?

I believe Mary understood something that none of the other disciples had grasped. Jesus said that she gave for the day of His burial. Others went to the tomb to anoint Jesus' body after He was buried, but Mary anointed Him before. Could it be that she was listening a little closer than the other disciples? Mary knew and believed what the others would not accept: that Jesus would, in fact, be arrested, crucified, and buried. She understood that the cross was right on the horizon. And if Jesus could give such a gift to her, how small a gift it was, to take even the world's most expensive perfume, and pour it on the feet of Jesus!

Jesus further explains in 12:8: **“For you always have the poor with you, but you do not always have Me.”** No matter what kinds of schools you have, no matter what kind of homes are raising the children, no matter what shelters or programs or welfare you have, you will always have the poor. Jesus said that. But the good news is that Jesus is preparing a place for you and me where there is no poverty. There is no hunger or homelessness. It is certainly important to care for the poor, but it is even more important to worship Jesus and be devoted to Him.

The sentence structure puts **“the poor”** and also **“Me”** in emphatic positions. Jesus is, of course, not saying that His followers can constantly put off doing good to the poor. On the contrary, His teaching makes it clear that the poor are important and that His followers must always have a deep concern for them. But these words also make it clear that concern for the poor is not to override all other considerations at all times.

Matthew and Mark tell this same story⁸ and mention a small detail that John omits. Jesus said that wherever the gospel is preached, what Mary did would be mentioned as a memorial to her. The slightest act of love for God, the slightest sacrifice will be remembered and rewarded. Don't think that anything you ever offer to God goes unnoticed. Others may not notice, but God always does. What you do for our Lord in private, He will reward openly!

What kind of gift will Jesus receive from you this Christmas? Will your life express wholehearted worship and honest devotion? Would you join me today in saying, “Jesus, I want to give you the gift that you desire. The most treasured thing that I have, the most treasured part of who I am, I place at your feet. When you do, your life will be a sweeter fragrance to God and to this world than any of the most expensive perfumes in the world.

Evangelist Luis Palau tells of a wealthy European family that decided to have their newborn baby baptized in their enormous mansion. Dozens of guests were invited to the elaborate affair, and they all arrived dressed to the hilt. After depositing their elegant wraps on a bed in an upstairs room, the guests were entertained royally. Soon the time came for the main purpose of their gathering: the infant's baptismal ceremony. But where was the baby? No one seemed to know. The child's governess ran upstairs and returned with a desperate look on her face. Everyone searched frantically for the baby. Then someone recalled having seen him asleep on one of the beds. The baby was on a bed all right—buried beneath a pile of coats, jackets, and furs. The object of that day's celebration had been forgotten, neglected, and nearly smothered. The baby, whose birthday we celebrate at Christmas, is easily hidden beneath the piles of traditions and cultural observances of the season. We need to enter this Christmas season asking, “Where's the baby?”⁹

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Notes

¹ Howard Harden, *What Does Jesus Want This Christmas?*

<http://sermoncentral.com/sermon.asp?SermonID=53143&ContributorID=5341> (12/16/02).

² Of the final events of Jesus' public ministry, John has selected three: (1) Mary's anointing of Jesus at Bethany, (2) the triumphal entry into Jerusalem, and (3) the coming of some Greeks to visit Jesus. Each has significance within the narrative. The 'Book of Signs' then concludes with an appeal to Isaiah 53 to explain why some did not believe, followed by a summarization of the mission and message of Jesus in His own words. The events of chapters 13-17 which follow are not public but private, intended for Jesus' disciples.

³ Gk. *polutimou*: a compound word from *polus*, meaning "much," and *time*, meaning "value."

⁴ Jewish people worked approximately 300 days a year since they didn't work on the Sabbath.

⁵ In Luke 7 we read of another gift made by another woman, a prostitute (7:37-50). Jesus was eating dinner in the home of a Pharisee. In came this woman, and she poured ointment on Jesus' feet and her tears rinsed them and she wiped them with her hair while she wept. Do you remember what Jesus said? "He who is forgiven little loves little. But he who is forgiven much loves much!" I believe that this is where Mary got her idea. Mary said to herself, I want to show Jesus how much I love him! So she took what was the most valuable possession she had, and she literally placed it at the feet of Jesus!

⁶ It would have been easy for Mary to anoint Jesus' feet. The guests undoubtedly reclined on mats on the floor with their heads and hands close to the table and their feet extending out in the opposite direction.

⁷ W.A. Elwell, *Evangelical Commentary on the Bible*, electronic ed.: John 12:1 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996).

⁸ Cf. Matt 26:6-13; Mark 14:3-9.

⁹ Preaching Today Citation: Greg Asimakoupoulos, Naperville, Illinois.