

SERIES: Gospel of John: Seeing is Believing?  
 SERMON: *The One for the Many*  
 SCRIPTURE: John 11:45-12:11  
 SPEAKER: Pastor Josh Black  
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### *Letting go is scary*

One of my favorite things to do in my life is to read and study. However, I wasn't always this way. As a student in high school and college I rarely went to class and when I did I was the guy in the back of the room who never so much as brought a pencil with him. In fact I really don't think I ever read a whole book until after I graduated college. So if I wasn't reading or studying in college, what was I doing? I'll spare you all the details, but I will share one thing. In college I joined the K-State skydiving club. It was a lot of fun, until I ran out of money and had to cut my career short.

We jumped out of these tiny Cessna planes that didn't have any seats in them. We sat on the floor with 2 other jumpers until we got up to about 3500 feet and that's when the fun began. One of us would throw open the side door to the plane. But in these planes we didn't simply jump out of the door. Instead we would put our feet out on a small peg on the side of the plane. Then we would hold on to the riser that ran between the bottom of the plane and the bottom of the wing. Then we would step off of the peg and hang from the riser. At this point we were simply flying alongside of the plane, under the wing, at about 100 miles per hour. It is quite fun really. But the scary part was the next step. It was at this point that our instructor would say "dot!" There was a dot painted on the underside of the wing. When the instructor said "dot" we would have to let go of the plane and look up at the dot which helped us arch our back properly.

Dropping from the plane is a lot of fun, but letting go is scary. But why is letting go so difficult? I don't understand all of the psychology of it, but it's probably because we fear we will fall to our death. Letting go of things is difficult not only in skydiving. Letting go is difficult in life. Especially letting go of the things we cling to for security and significance. We will see in our passage this morning that unless we let go and fall on Jesus we cannot have eternal life.

#### **John 11:45–12:11 (ESV)**

<sup>45</sup>Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what he did, believed in him, <sup>46</sup>but some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done. <sup>47</sup>So the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered the council and said, "What are we to do? For this man performs many signs. <sup>48</sup>If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation." <sup>49</sup>But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, "You know nothing at all. <sup>50</sup>Nor do you understand that it is better for you that one man should die for the people, not that the whole nation should perish." <sup>51</sup>He did not say this of his own accord, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation, <sup>52</sup>and not for the nation only, but also to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad. <sup>53</sup>So from that day on they made plans to put him to death.

<sup>54</sup>Jesus therefore no longer walked openly among the Jews, but went from there to the region near the wilderness, to a town called Ephraim, and there he stayed with the disciples.

<sup>55</sup>Now the Passover of the Jews was at hand, and many went up from the country to Jerusalem before the Passover to purify themselves. <sup>56</sup>They were looking for Jesus and saying to one another as they

stood in the temple, “What do you think? That he will not come to the feast at all?”<sup>57</sup> Now the chief priests and the Pharisees had given orders that if anyone knew where he was, he should let them know, so that they might arrest him.

<sup>12:1</sup> Six days before the Passover, Jesus therefore came to Bethany, where Lazarus was, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. <sup>2</sup> So they gave a dinner for him there. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those reclining with him at table. <sup>3</sup> Mary therefore took a pound of expensive ointment made from pure nard, and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped his feet with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. <sup>4</sup> But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (he who was about to betray him), said, <sup>5</sup> “Why was this ointment not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?” <sup>6</sup> He said this, not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief, and having charge of the moneybag he used to help himself to what was put into it. <sup>7</sup> Jesus said, “Leave her alone, so that she may keep it for the day of my burial. <sup>8</sup> For the poor you always have with you, but you do not always have me.”

<sup>9</sup> When the large crowd of the Jews learned that Jesus was there, they came, not only on account of him but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. <sup>10</sup> So the chief priests made plans to put Lazarus to death as well, <sup>11</sup> because on account of him many of the Jews were going away and believing in Jesus.

I’ve noticed three ironies in this passage that I want to draw our attention to this morning. I think as we examine these three ironies we will get to the heart of the passage. The three ironies are found under these three headings: 1) The *reason* for Jesus’ death, 2) the *nature* of Jesus’ death, and 3) the *response* to Jesus’ death.

## **THE REASON FOR JESUS’ DEATH**

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In chapter 11:1-44 we read about the resurrection of Lazarus. Jesus actually raised his friend Lazarus from the dead. John tells us that this was to reveal the glory of Jesus (11:4) so that people would believe (11:15). This is the last of the seven signs in the book of John. In the book of John the seven signs are not presented as mere miracles; they point to the significance of who Jesus is and what he came to accomplish. The signs are written so that the readers of this book might believe that Jesus is the Christ the Son of God (20:31) – or in other words, Jesus is not merely a man; he is God who became a man (1:14) and was sent by the Father to save God’s people from their sins (cf. 1:29). The resurrection of Lazarus shows us that Jesus is the resurrection and the life (11: 25a); Jesus has power and authority over life and death. Therefore, those who believe in him will have eternal life, even though they will die one day (11:25b). In verse 45 of our passage this morning we are told that many of the Jews who had come with Mary to Lazarus’ tomb and witnessed this sign also believed.

This bothers the Pharisees and the chief priests who sit on the ruling council called the Sanhedrin. So, verse 47 tells us, the Sanhedrin gathers to discuss this. Look at verse 48. “*If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation.*” They’re afraid that if they continue to let Jesus perform miracles, more and more people will believe in him and Rome will come and clean house.

Keep in mind during this time in Israel’s history they were occupied by the Romans. However, they experienced some level of autonomy and freedom from the Roman government. And during this period of autonomy and freedom the Sanhedrin served as the ruling power in Israel. The Sanhedrin

was a Council comprised of 71 Jewish leaders – 70 from the Sadducees (most of which were chief priests) and Pharisees (most of which were scribes) and 1 chairman, if you will, the high priest. However, their freedom was a contingent freedom. The Roman Empire desired peace and order. Any violation of that peace and order could result in a restriction of their autonomy and freedom; Rome could tighten its grip. So, if a lot of people begin to believe that Jesus is the Messiah it could cause a disturbance to peace and order in Israel. And the bottom line is this. If Rome was to intervene, the Sanhedrin could lose their power and position.<sup>1</sup>

In verse 48 they frame the issue as a loss of their place (referring to the temple) and their nation. But the real issue is their loss of power and position in the temple and over the nation. The temple was a cash cow for the Sanhedrin and they had great power over the nation. Quite simply, Jesus was a threat to all of this. And they were not willing to let go of their power and position. Self-promotion was far too important to them. They view Jesus as the problem and they view his death as the solution to their problem. Verse 53 says, “...*from that day on they made plans to put him to death.*”

Here’s the irony: The Sanhedrin sees Jesus as a threat to their position and power. That’s why they want to put him to death. But their hunger for position and power reveals their sin which is the real reason for Jesus’ death.

### **Jesus’ death is necessary because of sin and its penalty, death.**

Or to put it another way, the Sanhedrin are afraid that growing belief in Jesus will threaten their power and position. But Jesus says *without* belief in him we will all face a much bigger problem. Jesus doesn’t say that in this passage, but it is found throughout John. In John 3:36 Jesus says without belief we all face the wrath of God. Jesus says again in John 8:24 that unless we believe in him we will die in our sins. John 3:16 teaches us that we will all perish as condemned sinners if we don’t believe in him.

The real problem is sin. While Jesus’ death was initiated by the Sanhedrin, it was actually ordained by God and was intended to deal with the problem of sin and the penalty for sin which is eternal death.

If we get the problem wrong then we won’t understand the solution rightly. The Sanhedrin viewed Jesus as the problem because he threatened their position and power. They missed the real problem which was their sin, and therefore missed the significance of who Jesus is and why he came. It is amazing to me that in all of the deliberations, they never even considered for a moment that Jesus could have possibly been who he said he was.

We need to understand that the main problem we face, otherwise we’ll miss the significance of who Jesus is and what he came to accomplish. The main problem in our world and in our life is sin. The rest of our problems are symptoms of that main problem. And while it is true that many of our problems in life are not a direct result of our own sin, we must acknowledge that we are all sinners who are guilty before a holy God. The main problem we ultimately face is the wrath of God. And the cross is the only thing that has dealt with that problem.

I hope this will become clear as we look at the second irony.

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<sup>1</sup> Most of the content in this paragraph is from Mike Bullmore, “Priests, Nations, and the Sovereign Purpose of God.”

## THE NATURE OF JESUS' DEATH

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Look at verse 50. Here Caiaphas, the high priest, and therefore, chairman of the council speaks. *"...it is better for you that one man should die for the people, not that the whole nation should perish."*

This is disgusting to me. Caiaphas, in his position as a priest, knows sacrifice well. He understands the nature of sacrifice and he understands the role of a priest to serve as a mediator between God and man through offering sacrifice for sin. Caiaphas uses this sacred sacrificial language to speak of securing political position over Israel. He uses the language of substitutionary sacrifice to justify the sin he is about to commit. *"...one man should die for the people."* He's using the principle found throughout the OT of the one for the many.

But look again at what John tells us in verses 51-52. *"He did not say this of his own accord, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation, and not for the nation only but also to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad."*

Here is the irony. Caiaphas uses substitutionary sacrifice as a metaphor to persuade the Sanhedrin to put Jesus to death. But Caiaphas spoke more than he knew with this statement. The death of Jesus actually *is* a substitutionary sacrifice. He *does* serve as the one who gives his life for the many. But he's a substitutionary sacrifice for the real problem of sin and death not the political problems.

How do we know Jesus is a substitutionary sacrifice for sin? Verse 55 gives us a clue. *"Now the Passover of the Jews was at hand..."* In verse 53 we are told that the Sanhedrin made plans to put Jesus to death, but in verse 54 we're told that Jesus went into hiding in Ephraim, a town about 12 miles north of Jerusalem. Jesus' time for death had not yet come; it was still a few weeks away. For God, in his sovereignty, determined Jesus would die during the Passover feast. And why is this significant?

The Passover feast celebrated the first Passover, recorded in the book of Exodus (Ex. 12). If you are familiar with the Exodus, you know that before God led his people out of slavery in Egypt he sent 10 plagues on Egypt. The last plague included the death of the firstborn son. The Lord passed through all of Egypt and put to death all of the firstborn sons, except for those who had the blood of a lamb on the door frame of their house. So, at the first Passover the people of God slaughtered a lamb and took the blood of that lamb and wiped it on the door frame of their house. When the Lord passed through Egypt and struck down all of the firstborn in the land he passed over the houses of the Israelites which were covered by the blood – they were spared. The death and blood of the lamb served as a substitute for the death of the firstborn son. It was a substitutionary sacrifice.

Jesus was put to death on Passover to teach us that his death was also a substitutionary sacrifice for sin. In our sin we all deserve eternal death, but Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (Jn. 1:29). Jesus takes our sin on himself and pays the penalty we deserve to pay in his death. He is our substitute – the one for the many. We in turn take on all of his righteousness through faith.

2 Corinthians 5:21 says it this way: *"[God] made him to be sin, who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."*

## **Jesus' death is a substitutionary sacrifice that provides eternal life for all of God's people.**

This is good news. This is the heart of the gospel.

Another piece of irony in Caiaphas' statement is that about 30 years after Jesus' death the temple and the nation are lost anyway. In A.D. 70 Rome came into Jerusalem and destroyed the temple and took control of Jerusalem. The Sanhedrin lost most of their political power at that time. So, their plan didn't work; it fizzled out.

But Jesus' death is *still* a substitutionary sacrifice for sin. And while the nation of Israel was lost in A.D. 70 for almost 1900 years, the death and resurrection of Christ formed a new people that will never be destroyed; the gates of hell will not prevail against the Church (Mt. 16:18). And this new people, the Church, is comprised not only of Jews – Jesus Christ, through his death and resurrection, has gathered into one the children of God who are scattered all over the world (11:52) into one flock, under one Shepherd (10:16).<sup>2</sup>

The substitutionary death of Christ is the heart of the gospel. How should we respond to this gospel? The third irony in this passage shows us how we should respond to the gospel (to the substitutionary death of Jesus).

### **THE RESPONSE TO JESUS' DEATH**

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Look again at verse 3. *“Mary therefore took a pound of expensive ointment made from pure nard, and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped his feet with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.”*

I believe, as Jeff said last week, Mary's actions are in direct response to the raising of Lazarus. She believes, like her sister Martha, that Jesus is the Christ the Son of God; her actions demonstrate this. She believes that Jesus is the resurrection and the life. But Jesus tells us that her actions are serving another purpose she was likely unaware of.

Here's the irony. Mary's extravagance celebrates Jesus as the giver of life. But Jesus indicates in verse 7 that Mary's extravagance actually anticipates his death.

Mary doesn't yet know about the death of Jesus or its significance. However, Jesus points to the fact that her anointing was actually an anointing for his burial; her actions anticipate Jesus' death. I also think that Mary's extravagant actions tell those of us who do know of the significance of Christ's death how to respond to Christ's death.

In order to show this I want to observe the contrasts between Judas and Mary. The ointment Mary used to anoint Jesus' feet was very rare and very valuable. We're told that it could have been sold for three hundred denarii (5), which would have been a year's wages. The fact that she would use this ointment to anoint Jesus shows her extravagant generosity.

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Mike Bullmore, “Priests, Nations, and the Sovereign Purpose of God.”

Also, notice that Mary has no desire to promote herself. She seems to care nothing about her reputation. She undoes her hair and gets on the floor to wipe Jesus' feet. Undoing one's hair would have been inappropriate for a woman. And washing feet was work relegated to servants or slaves. Mary has no desire to promote herself – she has completely humbled herself in this act of extravagant devotion to Jesus.

Mary is generous and humble, whereas Judas is greedy and proud. Judas wants to promote himself. The editorial comment in verse 6 makes this plain to us. He says she should have allowed the ointment to be sold and the money given to the poor, but we know he really wanted to use the money on himself. He's trying to bolster his reputation as a do-gooder, but we know his heart. Greed is bad in and of itself, but it is really sick when someone tries to mask their greed with philanthropy. There is a real contrast between Mary and Judas. She is generous and humble, he is greedy and proud.

But before we get too excited about how bad Judas is, we have to ask ourselves an honest question. Who do you more closely identify with, Mary or Judas? Have you ever done something that on the outside seemed like sacrificial service, but was really in an attempt to promote your own reputation or pad your pocket? Are you doing something like that presently? Have you thought about doing something like that? The fact is we're all sinners full of pride and greed – whether that greed manifests itself in desire for money or power or position, many of us seek after our glory far more than we would like to admit.

John has done a good job of drawing out the sin of Judas and the Sanhedrin. They both want to promote themselves and they both want to hang on to power and possessions. But I hope John has also revealed our own sin as well, for unless we see our sin as the problem we'll never understand the significance of who Jesus is and what he came to accomplish.

Mary's actions actually mirror, in some measure, who Jesus is and what he came to accomplish. Let me explain. Not only is the anointment itself seen by Jesus to be an anointment for burial. Her humble and generous actions point to the death of Jesus (cf. Jn. 13). His death on the cross was the ultimate act of humility (cf. Phil. 2:8). And he was the one who had all things but generously poured them out so that we might become rich (2 Cor. 8:9). And it is that humble and generous substitutionary sacrifice that has paid for our sin.

### ***Holding on or being held?***

Mary's actions not only anticipate Jesus' death, they are also a model of how we should respond to Jesus' death. The Bible tells us that the appropriate response to Jesus is to repent and believe (Mk. 1:15; Acts 20:21). We must let go and fall on Jesus like Mary did.

But what do I mean by letting go and falling on Jesus? Think of skydiving again. If you don't let go of the plane, you're actually not skydiving; you're just being pulled by an airplane. In the same way, if we don't repent of our sin we can't believe in Jesus. We have to let go of anything we're holding on to for significance or security as we realize there is nothing in this world that can save us except Jesus.

Mary let go of her reputation and let go of her possessions. The Sanhedrin and Judas on the other hand wanted to keep holding on to power and possessions and self-promotion. We must repent; we must let go.

And we must believe; we must fall on Jesus. But what do I mean by falling on Jesus. Like I said earlier, if you don't let go of the plane, you're actually not even skydiving. But if you don't open your chute you're definitely not skydiving; you're just dropping. In skydiving you let go of the plane to be caught by the parachute. In the Christian life it is similar. We let go of sin and anything we are clinging to in order to be caught by Jesus. We stop holding on to one thing to be held by something else!

Notice the difference. In our sin *we* are holding on. By believing we are *being* held. Instead of trusting in our own grip we must trust that which holds us, Jesus. To believe we must trust Jesus completely. We must fall on him. We must trust his sufficient and substitutionary sacrifice. Or put another way we must be held by his sufficient and substitutionary sacrifice. We must be held by his righteousness, not our own. We must trust in his death as the penalty paid in our place. We must believe Jesus is able to deliver us from death and provide eternal life. We must fall on Jesus completely.

Mary fell on Jesus completely. She believed that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of God. And she gave evidence of life-giving belief. Mary was extravagant. I'm sure many of the people there were uncomfortable with the extravagance of her actions. I think of people who say (or think) things like this. "It's great that you love Jesus and all, but let's not take it too far." I think John puts Mary's extravagance at the center of our text this morning to show us what true belief looks like.

True belief, life giving belief is extravagant. Stop holding on; let go and be held. Repent of your sin and fall at Jesus feet in extravagant belief. Trust him as the all-sufficient sacrifice for sin and the only way to eternal life.

### **Benediction**

#### **Jude 24-25 (ESV)**

*Now to him who is able to keep you from [falling] and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy, to the only God, our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen.*

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