

# The Controversy Over Extravagant Worship

*Religious people think extravagant worship is a waste of time. But Mary of Bethany taught us that Jesus deserves only the best praise.*

Do you want to be a passionate worshiper of Jesus the Messiah? Although we may sincerely desire to worship our Savior with abandonment, many of us have grown up in a religious or home environment where we were never allowed, or never encouraged, to freely express our emotions.

Emotions are the language of a person's internal state of being. They are a form of communication that powerfully conveys the intensity of things we are feeling on the inside. Unbridled emotion will permit us to express ourselves in free, spontaneous and profound responses to the God who longs to have intimacy with us.

God has always wanted to be near His people. In the beginning, the first human couple enjoyed open, unbroken intimacy and fellowship with their Creator as they walked with Him "in the garden in the cool of the day" (Gen. 3:8, NKJV).

As we all know, sin broke that relationship and erected a "veil" of separation between the holy God and His own creation. God wanted to be near us so much—to repair the breach—that He became one of us. Through His Son, Jesus Christ, He "became flesh and dwelt among us ... full of grace and truth" (John 1:14).

By His death and resurrection, Christ tore away the veil and opened the way once more for face-to-face intimacy with the Father. But intimacy with God is not automatic; it takes time and commitment, motivated by a **ravishing hunger for Him**. Typically we rush into our "time with God," rattle off our

list of requests, and then rush off again. We must take the time to get to know Him as He knows us—just as His friends and disciples did.

Among Jesus' closest friends when He was on Earth was Mary of Bethany. She was one who publicly expressed her love for Jesus in an amazingly lavish way. The Bible tells us in John 12:1-3 that Jesus was attending a dinner party when Mary "took a pound of very costly oil of spikenard, anointed the feet of Jesus, and wiped His feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the oil."

In another Gospel account, we read that Mary's sister, Martha, complained to Jesus because Mary wasn't helping her serve the meal; but Jesus told Martha that Mary had chosen the good part (see Luke 10:40-42). That part was to sit at the feet of her Lord and friend, rapt in His words and His holy presence (see v. 39). Then, in an act of breathtaking extravagance, Mary lavished her love on Jesus in a display of unbridled devotion and abandoned worship.

According to the parallel accounts recorded in the Gospels of Matthew and Mark, this supper on Jesus' behalf was held in the home of a man known as "Simon the leper" (Matt. 26:6; Mark 14:3). Luke's account further identifies Simon as a Pharisee (see Luke 7:36,39). Although some biblical scholars contend that the story related in Matthew, Mark and Luke is a record of two different women, it is possible that all four accounts tell of two different acts by the same person.

John's account, however, is the only one that identifies Mary by name; the other Gospel writers refer to her simply as "a woman." Luke goes a little further, identifying her as a "sinner" (Luke 7:37). In that context the word "sinner" (Greek hamartolos) refers specifically to an immoral woman, or a woman of ill repute.

Matthew and Mark record that she poured the perfume on Jesus'

head (see Matt. 26:7; Mark 14:3); Luke and John say that she poured it on His feet, adding the additional detail that she wiped His feet with her hair (see Luke 7:38; John 12:3). We know from the different accounts that Jesus' disciples as well as others were in attendance and witnessed Mary's controversial act.

Let's try to consolidate these various accounts and see if we can frame the complete picture. Jesus is in Bethany, the village where Lazarus, Martha and Mary live. While there, He attends a supper in the home of a Pharisee known as Simon the leper. Lazarus is also one of the dinner guests, as are Jesus' disciples and others, perhaps some of Simon's friends.

Martha is there to serve. It appears that this was not a small, intimate meal but rather a large dinner party.

Suddenly, in the middle of everything, Mary appears, carrying an ornate bottle of very expensive perfume. Seemingly oblivious to the presence of perhaps two dozen or more witnesses, she stands behind Jesus' feet, wetting them with her tears (see Luke 7:38). Breaking open the vial of perfume, Mary first anoints Jesus' head and then His feet. Then, kneeling down, she gently and lovingly wipes Jesus' feet with her hair.

Such a blatantly public display of intimate affection probably caused a sudden embarrassed silence from everyone else in the room. For some, that embarrassed silence quickly became shocked outrage, but Mary didn't care. She was deeply in love with a man—the Messiah—who had forgiven her and saved her and who treated her with a love, dignity and respect that no one else had ever afforded her. Whatever else she may once have been or done, no matter how she may have wasted her life before, Mary is different now. **Jesus has changed her.**

Now she is bent on wasting her life on her Lord—the God who loved her and forgave her—and she doesn't care who knows about

it or what anyone else thinks. For Mary, the expensive perfume means nothing; it is merely a symbol of the unrestrained love she feels in her spirit and of her determination from that day forward to waste her life on God.

## Religious Criticism

It didn't take long for Mary's radical expression of love for Jesus to provoke strong criticism. "But there were some who were indignant among themselves, and said, 'Why was this fragrant oil wasted? For it might have been sold for more than three hundred denarii and given to the poor.' And they criticized her sharply" (Mark 14:4-5).

On the surface, the criticism appears quite practical and religiously correct. The perfume was worth three hundred denarii, equivalent in those days to a year's wages for a common laborer. Why "waste" such valuable essence on one person (no matter who he was) in a matter of a few seconds?

This is the typical response of religious people when confronted with an act of genuine spiritual devotion; it is incomprehensible to them. The religious mind counts the cost of such extravagance and concludes that it is a waste. Such criticism is almost always clothed in pious garb: "The perfume might have been sold ... and the money given to the poor."

What religious critics fail to understand is that extravagant acts of abandoned, "wasted" worship that are motivated by unfettered **love for God** need no justification or explanation before men. In fact, as I study the Bible, I find that extravagance in worship always wins out with God over self-conscious conservatism.

The real issue is whether we are trying to give attention or gain attention. God looks at the heart and welcomes the open, unfeigned adoration of His children, however it is expressed.

This is why Jesus **jealously** rose to Mary's defense. "But Jesus

said, 'Let her alone. Why do you trouble her? She has done a good work for Me. For you have the poor with you always, and whenever you wish you may do them good; but Me you do not have always. ... Assuredly, I say to you, wherever this gospel is preached in the whole world, what this woman has done will also be told as a memorial to her'" (Mark 14:6-9). He cut right through the pious hypocrisy to focus on matters of the heart.

What is the true object of our love? Jesus said that wherever a man's treasure is, that is where his heart will be also (see Matt. 6:21). Mary's heart was in the right place, and Jesus affirmed her.

Once again, Mary had chosen that good part, and it would not be taken away from her. She wasted everything she had ever achieved or earned on her new Lord!

### **The Door to Greater Intimacy**

Wasting our life on God is a doorway to greater intimacy with Him. It is a lifestyle practice that has been sorely missing in the modern, "fast-food" church for many years. It's beginning to make a comeback, however.

Hungry believers in all parts of the world and in every stream and denomination are starting to rediscover this lost key to the simple, deeper life. The Lord Himself is stirring it up and bringing it to the remembrance and awareness of His people. He is raising up a company of friends, a society of the brokenhearted, yet grateful.

This is neither a gender issue nor a theological, doctrinal, or sectarian issue, but an issue of the heart; a heart overflowing with love and gratitude to the One who poured out and "wasted" His divine fragrance on us. What greater "waste" could there be but that "while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8)?

God is drawing and calling His people to a deeper, focused walk with Him, not just into the inner court but also all the way into the most holy place, that safe, quiet inner chamber to which He alone has the key. But He has given us the key and has invited us to come in.

Jesus said, “‘But you, when you pray, go into your room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly’” (Matt. 6:6). Our prayers are welcomed and received before Him just as Jesus welcomed and received Mary’s tears that wetted His feet and her perfume that anointed His body for burial. Like Mary, a people of God are arising whose chief goal will be to waste their lives on Him.

A key to living a life wasted on God is to learn to enter the place of quietness before God; a place of meditation and what many writers of old have called contemplative prayer. That is where true intimacy and spiritual communion reach their fullest realization.

I invite you and challenge you to go on a journey with me to that secret inner place, a life wasted on Jesus. It is an invitation to join the society of the brokenhearted, a people of gratitude, meekness and faith who have felt the warm gaze of the Lord into their inmost being and have heard His affirmation, “I knew you were like that all the time.”

Out of that brokenness will come forth a fragrance that will fill the house, the fragrance of abandoned, “wasted worship” and a life completely poured out for God. That fragrance will rise and be collected in heaven, where one day the Messiah Himself will be pleased to pour it back out as an ointment to draw His people to Himself and bring healing to the nations.

The road to **true intimacy with God** is an inward journey, proceeding into His presence through the entrance gate of quietness of the soul. It is a narrow track that lies well off

the beaten path, virtually unseen and ignored by the vast majority of humanity careening headlong through life. Although it is not easy to find, the riches and rewards are well worth the effort.

Why don't you begin to follow it? Set off today on a road less traveled and allow the adventure that awaits to whet your appetite to get "wasted" on Jesus!

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