

What's in Your Alabaster Jar?

My daughter Elisabeth came down the stairs one morning in a rather reflective mood. Lissy, as we affectionately call her, has the enthusiasm and energy of 10 people, so it was unusual to see her so absorbed in thought. But when she shared with me the insight she had received during her devotions, I understood why—and her words got me thinking, too.

Lissy had been reading the story about the time Mary poured an alabaster jar of perfume on Jesus. What had amazed her was that although Mary was performing a completely unselfish act, even those closest to Jesus—His own disciples—criticized her.

As I reread the accounts of Mary's extravagant but misunderstood devotion (see John 12:1-7; Matt. 26:6-13; Mark 14:3-9) and meditated on the story, I felt the Holy Spirit working in my heart. He showed me some important truths about Mary's act that apply to believers today.

First, what Mary did was a great act of love on her part. She gave her best—a gift of great quality, quantity and cost. It was also an act of deep humility and reverence. After pouring out the perfume, she stooped down to anoint Jesus' feet, loosening the tresses of her hair—in those days a mark of unusual self-abandonment.

Mary was already committed to Jesus and didn't have to lavish her perfume on Him to prove her love. She could have held back and kept it for herself. She would have remained a follower and lover of Jesus and still would have spent eternity with Him in heaven—but imagine what she would have given up by holding on to her earthly treasure! She would have missed the opportunity to bless our Lord and to inspire those who came after her to give their all for Him.

Are we as selfless and devoted as Mary? Are we willing to give up that which is precious to us to not only honor God but also

be an example to those around us?

Second, as Lissy had noted, Judas and the other disciples criticized Mary. But she didn't care. She didn't apologize or express regret for her actions, even when Judas pointed out that the perfume could have been sold to help the poor.

When we become radical for Christ, willing to sacrifice ourselves and our possessions for Him, even those close to Him may not understand. They might be threatened by our gifts, they might become jealous, or they might react in a condescending, religious way, as Judas did.

How will we respond? Will we pull back? Will we regret our extravagance or begin to doubt the value of it?

Third, Mary had insight about the significance of her act. Somehow she sensed Jesus' impending death, even though His disciples, whom He had told of His death and resurrection, didn't seem to "get it." Some were concerned about an earthly kingdom. Others brazenly asked to sit at His right or left hand in heaven.

But Mary adored Him, and in her spirit, she understood—and performed this tremendous act of love to prepare His body for burial. As a result, Jesus defended her from the harsh criticism that came her way.

Not only that, but He said she would become famous! How ironic! By pouring her all on the Master and giving Him her most costly treasure, she set herself up to be remembered forever. Jesus said, "'I tell you the truth, wherever this gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her'" (Matt. 26:13, NIV).

Do we understand the true purpose of our relationship with Jesus? Or are we using it as a means to an end? Are we looking for power, position or other benefits, or do we find fulfillment in simply loving and obeying Him?

In reflecting on Mary's example, I was prompted to ask myself a pointed question: "What's in MY alabaster jar, and what am I going to do with it?"

I began to search my heart to see if there was anything hidden there that I wanted to treasure for myself. Would I be willing to pour it out on Him? I discovered two things in my "jar" that I was holding back—and found that I struggled to relinquish these to Him, even though I love Him dearly and want to pursue Him with all my heart.

What about you? What precious perfume is locked inside your heart that could be lavished on our Lord? The little treasures you and I struggle to hold on to may hold back opportunities to worship Him with extravagant praise, releasing ministry and service to Him that will bless all those around us.

What's in YOUR alabaster jar? And what are you going to do with it?