

WORSHIP

The Christian's Highest Occupation

Alfred P. Gibbs

Copyright © 1950

CHAPTER FOUR

THE MEANING OF WORSHIP: MARY OF BETHANY

C. The third instance that illustrates the meaning of worship, as giving to God, is the case of Mary of Bethany.

The story is recorded in John 12:1-11, and is perhaps one of the most striking and beautiful instances of worship in the whole range of Scripture. The outline that follows is not original. It is a good example of that scriptural ability to really “distinguish between things that differ.”

“Then Jesus six days before the passover came to Bethany, where Lazarus was which had been dead, whom He raised from the dead. There they made him a supper; and Martha served: but Lazarus was one of them that sat at the table with him. Then took Mary a pound of ointment of spikenard, very costly, and anointed the feet of Jesus, and wiped his feet with her hair: and the house was filled with the odour of the ointment.

“Then saith one of His disciples, Judas Iscariot, Simon’s son, which should betray Him, Why was not this ointment sold for three hundred pence, and given to the poor? This he said, not that he cared for the poor; but because he was a thief, and had the bag, and bare what was put therein.

“Then said Jesus, Let her alone: against the day of my burying hath she kept this. For the poor always ye have with you; but me ye have not always. Much people of the Jews therefore knew that he was there: and they came not for Jesus’ sake only, but that they might see Lazarus also, whom he had raised from the dead. But the chief priests consulted that they might put Lazarus also to death; Because that by reason of him many of the Jews went away, and believed on Jesus”

Let us examine this incident negatively, and seek to discover what Mary did not come to do on this memorable occasion. From this negative approach, we can learn much of the positive character of true worship.

(1) *Mary did not come to hear a sermon*

Even though the greatest Teacher the world has ever know was there, of Whom it was said:
“Never man spake like this man.”

It had been her privilege, in times past, to sit at His feet and hear His word. The lessons she had learned had not been forgotten; but this was not her purpose as she came into the presence of the One she loved above all others.

We have before pointed out that the Lord's Supper, instituted by Christ on the eve of His betrayal and death, exists for the purpose of enabling believers to remember Him, and thus give to Him and the Father the worship of their hearts. Therefore the primary purpose of such a gathering is not to hear an exposition of the word of God by some able teacher, good though this may be on some other occasion; but to spend the time in occupation with the One whose supper it is, and Who said: **"This do in remembrance of me"** (I Corinthians 11:24)

(2) Mary did not come to make a request of Him, as she had done before:

"Then when Mary was come where Jesus was, and saw him, she fell down at his feet, saying unto him, Lord, if thou hadst been here, my brother had not died" (John 11:32).

Her purpose was not to pour out her soul in earnest supplication before Him who had omnipotence at His command, and could have granted any request she might make.

Though she fully realized the value of prayer, yet this was not the motive that actuated her as she came to Him.

She came not to get, but to give.

Likewise the Lord's Supper does not exist for the purpose of enabling believers to supplicate the throne of grace, invaluable though prayer is. This gathering of believers is for worship which, as we have seen, is distinct from prayer.

(3) Mary did not come to meet her fellow believers

There were many there, and she loved them all dearly, for they loved her Lord; but it was not to be occupied with the Lord's people, or to enjoy fellowship with them that was her uppermost thought. She desired to be occupied with the Lord Himself, to the exclusion of every other person and every other thing on earth.

Surely this should be the purpose that should animate the breast of every Christian as, responsive to the word of his Lord, he seeks to gather with his fellow believers for the purpose of remembrance and worship.

Fellowship with Christians is good and necessary, but it is not the greatest thing. The good is often allowed to become the enemy of the best.

It is possible for our fellow believers to loom so large in our consciousness that the Lord Himself is relegated to a secondary place. Fellowship primarily is "with the Father and with his Son," and fellowship with each other naturally flows from this union and communion with Him.

(4) Mary did not come to be refreshed by Jesus

Though this might well have been her motive.

After the humdrum round of domestic or business duties, she might have argued that she needed the spiritual relaxation and refreshment that only He could impart, but this was not her motive in coming.

There is surely nothing more refreshing to the believer, weary with his battle with the world, the flesh and the Devil, than to come and sit quietly in the presence of the Lord, there to have his cares dissipated, and the calm of Heaven enter his soul.

Mary's act teaches us that this is not the greatest thing in life.

She came, not to be refreshed herself, but to refresh the Lord and fill His soul with joy! We are all fundamentally selfish in our outlook on things. We think very largely in terms of what this, or that, will bring in pleasure or satisfaction to us.

By this act Mary anticipated the cross and its sufferings, and saw to it that her Lord was refreshed on the eve of His redemptive work.

Thus, on this occasion, she did for her Lord what David's men once did for him. At his express desire for the drink of the water from Bethlehem's well, three of his mighty men broke through the surrounding host of the Philistines to gratify their king's request, and satisfy his desire: **“And David longed, and said, Oh that one would give me drink of the water of the well of Bethlehem, which is by the gate! And the three mighty men brake through the host of the Philistines, and drew water out of the well of Bethlehem, that was by the gate, and took it, and brought it to David: nevertheless he would not drink thereof, but poured it out unto the Lord. And he said, Be it far from me, O Lord, that I should do this: is not this the blood of the men that went in jeopardy of their lives? therefore he would not drink it. These things did these three mighty men”** (II Samuel 23:15-17).

Mary's beautiful deed surely teaches us that worship is not intended to produce self-satisfaction in the believer, but to give satisfaction to the Saviour.

(5) Mary did not come to meet the host

Nor even her own relatives in the flesh. We are not told who the host was on this occasion, but Mary had no eyes for him, her eyes were upon Another.

She viewed the Lord as the Host and came to do Him honor.

Christendom, with its special caste of clergy, has very largely eliminated from people's minds the fact that, at the Lord supper, Christ is the Host at His own table, and all the gathered believers are but guests at His invitation.

How often the “minister” is allowed to become “the host,” or the focal center of attraction; and people consequently are more occupied with his appearance, personality and eloquence than they are with the Lord Himself. Thus, perhaps quite unconsciously, man is allowed to usurp the place that Christ has reserved for Himself, as the Host at His own supper. As the hymn puts it:

“The Host art Thou, O blessed Lord,
Thy honored guests are we;
With grateful and adoring hearts,
We would remember Thee.

Lord Jesus Whom, unseen, we love,
As thus we muse on Thee;
We none would see, save Thee alone,
Thou Man of Calvary!”

May it be ours to give the Lord His rightful place as the divine Host at His own supper, and refuse to allow any man, however pleasing his personality, however dynamic his leadership, or however gifted his ministry, to rob Christ of His rightful place of absolute pre-eminence.

(6) Mary did not come to Him because it was the popular thing to do

On the contrary, it was at a time when the pent up hatred of both the religious and political world was about to break upon the Son of God.

Save for a few inconspicuous disciples, mostly of the common class, He was the “**despised and rejected of men.**”

The period of His popularity had waned, and the eve of His betrayal and crucifixion was at hand.

It was “**six days before the Passover,**” when the world should stain its hands with the blood of the Christ of God, that Mary came with her love gift to pour on the feet of the Saviour.

By this act she proclaimed louder than any words could say, her sincere love and devoted loyalty to the One whom the world would not acknowledge. Thus she took her stand for Him and shared in His rejection. The believer must also be prepared, in loyalty to his Lord and to His word, to brave the contempt of the political world, and even the persecution of false religious systems and political organizations, in order to worship God in a manner pleasing to Him. The path of wholehearted discipleship has never been crowded, or popular.

The Christian, who seeks to carry out those scriptural principles of gathering, which are laid down in the Bible, will find plenty of opposition, even from those who claim to be fundamental in their doctrinal beliefs. If however, like Mary, he has a single eye to the glory of Christ, he will “**count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus, his Lord**” (Philippians 3:8).

He must be prepared, as a worshipper, to experience something of what Paul calls “**the fellowship of His sufferings**” (Philippians 3:10).

He can rest assured that, as in the case of Mary, his faithfulness to the Lord and to His word shall not pass unnoticed, nor remain unrewarded by Him in “that day,” when all His own shall appear before the Judgment seat of Christ: “**But why dost thou judge thy brother? or why dost thou set at nought thy brother? for we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ**” (Romans 14:10).

(7) Mary did not come to withhold her best, but poured it all out fully, freely and joyously at the feet of her Lord

Let us note several things in connection with this gift she made, and which so beautifully illustrates true worship:

Her gift was a very costly one (v. 3)

To secure it she had denied herself many things that would have been perfectly legitimate for her to purchase for her own use. Inasmuch as the laborer of that period received but a penny a day for his services, her gift represented a whole year’s salary. Thus it was no inconsiderable gift that she brought. Mary’s heart had been so completely won to the Saviour that she did not count the cost of expressing her appreciation of Him.

Love is ever measured by the sacrifice it makes on behalf of its object.

Our Lord “**loved the Church, and gave himself for it**” (Ephesians 5:25).

Can we do any less for Him?

That worship which costs nothing in the way of time, energy, thought and money is not worthy of the name. Like Mary, each believer must be prepared to pay for the privilege of worship, however great the cost may be.

David could say: “**I will not give sleep to mine eyes, or slumber to mine eyelids, until I find out a place for the Lord, an habitation for the mighty God of Jacob**” (Psalm 132:4-5).

(b) Her gift had been reserved for this special purpose (v. 7).

She had treasured in her heart the words that fell from His lips as she had sat at His feet. Consequently, she knew He was to be betrayed, crucified, buried and rise again.

Thus, in spiritual discernment, she far surpassed the disciples.

They never seemed to really grasp the full significance of His words, even though He used the plainest of language in describing these momentous events which were to take place, and become the

“Center of two eternities,
which look, with rapt,
adoring eyes onward,
and back to Thee!”

(See Matthew 16:21; Mark 10:32; etc.).

Mary thus had the signal honor of being the only one who anointed the Lord for His burial; the other women came too late! (See Mark 16:1-6; Luke 23:55-56).

Mary of Bethany had no need to go to the tomb, for she knew that the One, whose word had called Lazarus from death to life, would take up the life He had laid down for her redemption (John 10:17-18).

How good it is when believers come, first as individuals to Him, with their treasured store of the costly spikenard of their appreciation of Him; and then, collectively with their fellow saints, pour out the perfume of their adoration in His presence. Such an offering not only honors the Son, but delights the heart of the Father also.

(c) Her gift was all brought to the feet of Christ (v. 3).

Those feet which had walked the dusty and rugged roads of Palestine, and had carried blessings everywhere they went, were indeed “beautiful” to her: “**And how shall they preach, except they be sent? as it is written, How beautiful are the feet of them that preach the gospel of peace, and bring glad tidings of good things!**” (Romans 10:15).

She knew those feet were soon to carry Him willingly to Calvary, there to be pierced for her transgressions and wounded for her iniquities.

She knew also that, as her Messiah, He should one day occupy a throne and, in resurrection glory, should reign until God made His enemies to become the footstool of His feet: “The Lord said unto my Lord, Sit thou at my right hand, until I make thine enemies thy footstool. The Lord shall send the rod of thy strength out of Zion: rule thou in the midst of thine enemies” (Psalm 110:1-2).

Doubtless she had all this in mind as she approached Him with her precious gift, which she now unreservedly poured out, in its entirety, at His feet.

- She kept back nothing for her own use, but yielded her all to Him.
- There were no mental reservations with her gift.
- She desired no half measures by which to express her devotion to her Lord.

Unlike Ananias and Sapphira who, to make “**a fair show in the flesh,**” “**kept back part of the price,**” she willingly and gladly gave her all to Him (Acts 5:2).

The believer can surely profit by her noble example which, in turn, received Christ's unstinted commendation.

Worship must be whole-hearted if it is to be pleasing to Him. Lukewarm devotion, half-hearted praise, and divided affections, are alike nauseating to Him. (Revelation 3:14-18). He rightly demands, deserves and should receive the place of absolute pre-eminence in every department of the believer's life. May it be ours, like Mary, not to disappoint Him in this respect, but delight His heart with our whole-souled devotion and worship.

(d) Her gift was accompanied by an attitude of utter self-abnegation.

We are told that after she had anointed His feet with the perfume, she wiped them with her hair.

The Scriptures inform us that a **“woman's glory is her hair.”**

Thus by this act she literally brought her glory to His feet in lowly, yet sublime adoration: “But if a woman have long hair, it is a glory to her: for her hair is given her for a covering” (I Corinthians 11:15).

What a beautiful picture this is of that necessary attitude of heart humility which should characterize the worship of God's people!

God has distinctly declared that **“no flesh should glory in his presence”** (I Corinthians 1:29).

The flesh, whatever form it may assume, should have no place in worship. All the natural glories, or excellencies that man may possess must be brought into the dust in the presence of the God of the universe. Here, brilliant intellect, physical strength and skill, capable leadership, persuasive eloquence, magnetic personality, artistic genius, nobility of birth, the possession of vast wealth, political prominence, or profound learning has no place whatever.

There can be no reason or room for pride in the presence of Deity. We do well to sing Isaac Watt's beautiful hymn:

“When I survey the wondrous cross
On which the Lord of glory died;
My richest gain I count but loss,
And pour contempt on all my pride.

Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast,
Save in the cross of Christ, my God;
All the vain things that charm me most,
I sacrifice them to His blood.”

(e) Her gift resulted in the whole house being filled with the exquisite fragrance of the perfume she had so lavishly poured on His feet.

All the occupants of the house shared in the benefits of her munificent gift.

- The Lord Himself was given His rightful place as supreme.
- She herself would long bear the fragrance of the spikenard everywhere she went.
- Each member of that company, as he left that place, would carry on his person, some traces of that sweet perfume.

True there were those who criticized the act, and referred to it as “waste”; but the Lord’s commendation more than compensated her for the adverse criticism she received.

We have seen that Scripture views worship as both an individual and collective act. It is only as each believer in an assembly brings to the feet of his Lord the treasured gift of the perfume of his appreciation and worship, that the whole gathered company of Christian will be affected by it.

The sweet fragrance of such a volume of worship will linger pleasantly in the memory of those present. Furthermore, some of its savor will be carried by them to others, who will thus take note that they have “been with Jesus” (Acts 4:13).

It was when the whole congregation “were as one, to make one sound to be heard in praising and thanking the Lord . . . that then the house was filled with a cloud . . . for the glory of the Lord had filled the house of God” (II Chronicles 5:13-14).

These three illustrations from Scripture should surely suffice to drive home the truth, which was stated at the beginning of this particular heading, that worship is giving to God.

~ end of chapter 4 ~

<http://www.baptistbiblebelievers.com/>
