

# “And the fragrance filled the house.”

Tim Miller, Gateway Fellowship, Feb 19, 2017

## Jokes

- My wife and I often laugh about how competitive we are...but I laugh more.
- Luke Skywalker is probably my favorite hero who looks 100% prepared to figure skate at all times. (Nathan Usher)
- What my wife thought on our first four dates. 1.) Nice shirt. 2.) Another nice shirt. 3.) That shirt again? 4.) He has two shirts.

## The Text: John 12

**The fragrance of Mary’s worship was costly.** It was expensive. A year’s wages. A pint of pure nard. The best of the best. I don’t have things like this much in my mass produced world of commercialized, brilliant, affordable, beautifully packaged, internationally sourced--but nearly immediately available--products. We seem snobbish about how low brow Walmart is, but any of us standing there in that temperature controlled environment, a warehouse sized room filled with plastic packages so perfect in their texture and shape that they make ancient pottery seem dull, with colorful and perfectly printed labels. And products produced at prices that make them available to the masses. We are — nearly all of us — wealthier in this sense than even Solomon in his royal robes and his cedar panelled dwelling. But we don’t generally come into contact with things so precious that we shudder to hold them in our hands for fear we damage them. The closest I come is when I pick up a super nice guitar. I take that back! A BRAND NEW BABY evokes a similar kind of careful dread in me that Mary’s perfume might. Her perfume is foreign to me. To own such lavish things would be sin to my grandfather’s church. How shameful to have perfume that costs thirty thousand dollars. It’s the kind of luxury good that exists only to bolster the image of the self-important and exceedingly wealthy. And Mary has it. Think about that for a moment. Mary wasn’t poor. But Mary poured her wealth out in a single symbolic and heartfelt act of devotion. *And the fragrance filled the house.*

**Not everyone like the fragrance.** It annoyed. Her unshielded devotion was costly, not only financially, but in terms of social etiquette. The disciples are annoyed. Simon, the host, an important local spiritual authority in the community, didn’t say anything with words, but his non-verbal communication was abundantly clear to Jesus. “What does

she think SHE'S doing?" Jesus rebukes the disciples — "Leave her alone! she's done a beautiful thing!" And then he directly confronted Simon in his own home. Mary pushed through all contrivances, all appearance, all reputation, all civility, all rules of how to act around people, how to act in front of respectable men, and fell, in tears, passion, and unrestrained worship at Jesus' feet. It was much. As much as her heart could give. And the fragrance filled the house.

**What is Jesus worth to Mary?** The cost. Spikenard, worth 300 denarii, or 300 day's wages. What is that for you? How many thousands of dollars? Would you take \$30,000 dollars cash and spend it on one act, one distinct moment, of worship to Jesus? She did. It was costly. It spoke to what he was worth to her. You can tell what somebody is worth to you by what you're willing to sacrifice for them. What's Jesus worth to you? Is he worth your time? Your embarrassment? Your money? Your passion? Your reputation? Your relationships? Your image? What does he mean to you? I wonder what sort of fragrance we would give off if we gave our most expensive worship, our best worship to Jesus. Mary did. And the fragrance filled the house.

**Mary received much to pour out much.** From Luke's version of this story we see that Jesus had an interesting interaction with Simon where he let's him in on the secret of Mary's great love, and Simon's not-so-great love for Jesus. The secret is that Mary has been forgiven much, so she loves Jesus much. Simon hasn't experienced great grace, so he isn't awed by it like she is. In fact, he's annoyed at it when he sees it. Have you ever been annoyed at other people's passion for Jesus? I have. I figured out a long time ago that people who love Jesus less than us, we tend to look down on as slackers, but people who love Jesus more than us we tend to look down on as fanatics or maybe just overly emotional. "I'm glad I don't act foolish like that." David put so much heart into worshipping God that he literally danced his clothes off. I don't think he was naked, but he wasn't wearing what he should in public. And his wife responded a bit like Simon. But he was the one with God's pleasure. He was the one who had experienced grace. She hadn't. And after that, she was barren. I think that's important. If our worship is without passion, it's often accompanied by barrenness of spirit. But David danced because he knew God's presence, Mary poured out extravagant perfume, accompanied with tears and kisses and towel dried it with her own hair — passion! It wasn't barren, in fact, her one act of devotion is still bearing its children wherever the story is read or told. And the fragrance still fills the house.

**Mary knew forgiveness.** Forgiveness is the wonder of being trusted again by God in the place where I disgraced him (Rita Snowden). I wonder if maybe we need a refresher course in what it means to be forgiven by God. I wonder if maybe we've lost a little bit of

that. Certainly if we are currently entertaining sin knowingly, actively violating our conscience in the sight of God, we will be able to keep saying the right words, but our experience of grace will suffer. If you have something to surrender, really surrender, not theoretically, but actually, I wonder if the Lord would be so kind right now as to bring it to your mind. It may be the thing you hope he doesn't bring to your mind. But we will only be as free as our level of surrender to the Lord. Anything we withhold, holds us. The Lord would have your whole heart, and he would have it be HIS, and have it free. Do your business with him. And then enter into the wonder of his forgiveness afresh. And then express your love, and let the fragrance fill the house.

**Mary was a hungry soul.** Why do I identify with this story so much? I think because I've always been a hungry soul. Hungry souls usually do not stay on the path of respectability and virtue because it makes sense. Hungry souls need big experiences and adventures to feel alive. And so we tend to make big choices for good or evil. If we follow Jesus, it's usually because we've found a great big experiential exciting and real Jesus who has demanded enough of us to keep us experiencing him deeply — because our hunger is deep. But if we don't get that; if we get a white republican respectable Jesus who gives rules and laws and boring sermons and some nice choruses and not much else...well...then...the world seems too big, beautiful, true, and real to square with that...and we tend to be alcoholics and playwrights and addicts of various kinds. We're the tax collectors and prostitutes you read about in your new testament. We're also the David's and Paul's and Mary's. And when we actually finally get it, when we really experience God's love, the fragrance fills the house.

**Mary was forgiven MUCH.** Judah Smith asked the question, "Are we kinda bad? Or are we superb bad?" And that's an interesting way to talk about it. Some folk think that they are basically good people, they've made a few mistakes, and grace covers them, but for everything else, there's mastercard — for everything else there's hard work and good choices and personal integrity and character. They've made a few mistakes, but the good stuff in their life was them. But if we get any real sense of our need for Jesus, we realize that even the good stuff we did for him...was still him. "What do you have that you did not receive?" asks Paul. And, "By God's grace I am what I am...I worked harder than any other apostle, yet it wasn't really me alone — it was grace working in and through me." Simon doesn't love like Mary because Simon doesn't know himself like Mary does. Simon imagines his life is 20% grace, 80% I got this. Mary knows she was 100% lost, and now she's 100% found and it has 0% to do with her earning it or maintaining it. It has 100% to do with this extravagant man, this LOVE that came in search for her and showed her what she'd been missing her whole life. It's love that's

better than any of us ever dared to dream, much less, hope for...and in that love, it just makes sense. *It doesn't even feel like a sacrifice for the fragrance to fill the house.*

**I wish I had Mary's proper back story.** I know some of it. A reputation as a morally evil woman. 7 demons cast out of her. Her brother, Lazarus, raised from the dead. But those are only the major plotlines. I want the whole story, slowly told. I want to sit in her kitchen, drink coffee and lean in, asking more questions. "Yeah, but then what happened? Wait! Go back and explain what you meant when you said you never met a man like him before. How was he different. How did you experience men before Jesus? How often did he stay here? What was he like? Was he intimidating? Did he have a good singing voice? You say nobody ever loved you like he does — how do you know? Just start over from the beginning — go back to your childhood and tell me everything!" *I suspect each of you who loves Jesus has this story, like she does, and I suspect that as you tell your story of how you met him, what he did, and how you came to know his love, as you tell the story — even just to tell it — the fragrance begins to fill the house.*

**Mary did a beautiful thing.** "Leave her alone, she has done a beautiful thing." Those words are Jesus' defence of Mary against the accusation that what she did was a waste. A waste! Judas said it first, but the other disciples joined right in the slander. Such a practical value system. Productivity. Efficiency. Economics. Doing the most good with the Lord's money. It all makes sense. And Jesus responds with a totally different value. Beauty. I think maybe we've lost the wonder of life and are thinking like misers, investors, bankers and factory operators, instead of like worshipers and artists. His defense is simple, "It's beautiful. It's worth it." This, for me, rings deeply into my core. I live with a refrain: **"Make something beautiful for God, every day, release it into the world, and even if no one cares, do it again the next day."** "What a waste!" says the world when they see what we've done for Jesus, what we've given up, and what we've endured for him. Maybe even our own friends may think or say this from time to time. But the only voice that matters is the voice saying, "You've done a beautiful thing." *And in that expression of beauty, the fragrance fills the house.*

**Mary let her hair down.** I think we can miss this detail. In that culture, women who were respectable did not let their hair down in public — it was considered a powerful aspect of a woman's beauty and femininity, and as such it was preserved for the romantic partnership. This is why in 1 Corinthians 11 Paul says that everybody already knows that women praying and prophesying in the public meeting should bun up and cover their hair. Temple prostitutes or simply loose women let their hair down in public — in that culture, at that time. But since our culture is different, we may miss this detail. Mary let her hair down and wiped Jesus' feet with them. The expensive fine oil was

captured in her hair. I remember reading that a queen fragranced herself so thoroughly with musks that her draperies still held the smell centuries later. Pure nard was used for only very special occasions. Romance. Funerals. Worship. Interestingly, this moment hits all of them. I can see the disciples and the host of the party raising their eyebrows and being authentically uncomfortable with this public display of affection. I am stunned by this one right now. So much affection for Jesus. And he receives it as appropriate. And the fragrance filled the house.

**Jesus was fragrant.** Matthew's account shows us that Mary poured one pound of pure nard on Jesus' head, body, and feet. He said, "She is preparing me for burial." In a few days, he would be beaten, punched, flogged, and carry a cross up a long hill, with that hair still smelling of Mary's worship. That hair hung, bloodied, adorned with a wicked thorny crown, and it hung there, still fragrant. The smell of one for whom he was dying. A fragrant reminder to Jesus of why the cross was worth it. Later, his body was wrapped with 100 pounds of fragrant spices for Jewish burial. So, with Mary's, that's 101 pounds...and the fragrance filled the tomb. Anyone wager a bet that on Easter morning when he rose from the dead and appeared to the disciples alive in their midst...that the fragrance filled the house?

**The fragrance still fills the house.** Paul said in 2 corinthians 2 that we are to God the aroma of Christ as we spread the smell of what it is to know him everywhere we go. Some smell life and others smell death, but God smells Jesus when our hearts are authentically his. Now where do you suppose Paul got the idea that intimacy with Jesus involves and spreads a fragrance? "Wherever this gospel is preached, what she has done will be told." And even just in the telling, a little bit of that fragrance may begin to fill the house.