

J. C. RYLE'S NOTES ON THE GOSPEL OF JOHN  
12:1-11

1. Then, six days before the passover, Jesus came to Bethany, where Lazarus was who had been dead, whom He had raised from the dead. 2. There they made him a supper; and Martha served, but Lazarus was one of those who sat at the table with him. 3. Then Mary took a pound of very costly ointment of spikenard, anointed the feet of Jesus, and wiped his feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the ointment. 4. Then said one of his disciples, Judas Iscariot, Simon's *son*, who would betray him, 5. Why was not this ointment sold for three hundred pence and given to the poor? 6. 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 in it. 7. Then Jesus said, Let her alone; against the day of my burying she has kept this. 8. For the poor ye have with you always, but me ye have not always. 9. Now a great many of the Jews knew that he was there; and they came, not for Jesus' sake only, but that they might also see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. 10. But the chief priests consulted that they might put Lazarus to death also, 11. because that by reason of him many of the Jews went away and believed in Jesus.

1.--[*Then six days...Bethany.*] Every intelligent reader of the Gospel will see that John purposely omits at this point certain events which are recorded by Matthew, Mark, and Luke. He passes at once from our Lord's retirement to the city called Ephraim, to His return to Bethany for the last time. In this interval will be found the things related in Matthew 10:17-34; Mark 10:32-52; Luke 18:31-19:28. In whatever part of Palestine this city Ephraim was, it is almost certain that between it and Bethany Jesus passed through Jericho, healed two blind men there, converted the publican Zaccheus, and spoke the parable of the nobleman who went into a far country, after giving to his ten servants ten pounds.

Why St. John did not record these facts we do not know, and it is mere waste of time to inquire. A reverent mind will be content to remember that John wrote by inspiration of God and was guided by infallible direction, both as to what he recorded and what he did not record. Reason and common sense, moreover, tell us that if the four Evangelists had all narrated exactly the same things, their value as independent witnesses would have been greatly damaged. Their variations and diversities are a strong indirect proof of their credibility. Too close an agreement would raise a suspicion of collusion and look like an attempt to deceive.

The expression "six days before the passover" is remarkable, because at first sight it seems to contradict Mark's narrative of the anointing, which Mark expressly says was "two days before the passover" (Mark 14:1). Hence some maintain that the Greek words should be translated "before the six days of the passover feast," leaving the precise day indefinite and uncertain. To this, however, it is reasonably objected that the passover feast was more than six days, and that the proposed translation is not a

probable rendering of the Greek words. To this I must add that in my opinion there seems no necessity for departing from the English version. It is not only possible but probable, as Lightfoot maintains, that there were two distinct anointings of our Lord, one six days before the passover and the other two days before. [The reader is requested to refer back to the notes on John 2:2 where he will find this point fully discussed.]

The passover was slain on the Thursday evening. At this rate, our Lord must have arrived at Bethany on Friday, the afternoon or evening before the Sabbath. Thus he must have spent His last earthly Sabbath with Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, at Bethany.

That the disciples must have journeyed to Bethany with a full impression that a great crisis was at hand and the end of their Master's ministry approaching, one can hardly doubt after reading the plain warnings recorded in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. But whether they really thought their Master would be put to death, or whether they did not secretly expect He would soon manifest His Divine power, take His kingdom and reign, is more than questionable.

A more deliberate, voluntary, calm walking up to death than our Lord's last journey into Judea, it is impossible to conceive.

[*Where Lazarus...raised from the dead.*] These words seem to show that Lazarus lived at Bethany and was not merely a visitor or lodger there. They also show the immense importance of the miracle wrought on him. Within two miles of Jerusalem and the temple there lived for weeks, if not for months, a man well known to many Jews, who had been actually raised from his grave after being four days buried. He had not been raised only, and then disappeared from public notice, but he lived where he was raised.

Lightfoot draws out the following interesting scheme of our Lord's disposal of time during the last six days before His crucifixion: (1) On Saturday He supped with Lazarus. (2) On Sunday He rode into Jerusalem publicly on an ass. This was the day when the Jews used to take out a lamb from the flock, for each family, and to keep it separate for the passover. On this day the Lamb of God publicly presented Himself in Zion. (3) On Monday He went to Jerusalem again and cursed the barren fig tree on the way. (4) On Tuesday He went again to Jerusalem and spoke for the last time to the people. Returning, He sat on the Mount of Olives and delivered the famous prophecy of Matthew 24 and 25, and supped that night with Simon the leper. (5) On Wednesday He tarried in Bethany. (6) On Thursday He went to Jerusalem, ate the passover, appointed the Lord's Supper, and the same night was taken before the priests as a prisoner. (7) On Friday He was crucified.

2.--[*There they made him a supper.*] These words show the joyful hospitality with which the Master was received by the disciples. The expression "they" may perhaps be used indefinitely, according to a common Hebraism. (Compare Matthew 5:15, 10:10, 13:48, and John 15:6.) It then simply means "a supper was made." If not so used, it evidently can apply to none but Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. Whether the supper was on Friday evening when our Lord arrived, after the Sabbath began, or on the Saturday,

or the Sabbath Day, is immaterial. It is evident that hospitality was thought no breach of the Sabbath among the Jews.

Lightfoot says the feast of the Jews, on this particular day six days before the passover, was always peculiarly liberal and sumptuous.

Hutcheson observes: "It is not unlawful at some times to enjoy the liberal use of the creatures in a sober manner. Christ does not decline this supper; sometimes He went to the feasts of Pharisees and sometimes of Publicans." (Luke 7:36; Matt. 9:11.)

[*And Martha served.*] The natural temperament of this good woman comes out here as elsewhere. She could not sit still and do nothing while her Lord was in her house. She must be actively stirring and trying to do something. Grace does not take away our peculiar characteristics.

[*But Lazarus...table with him.*] This appears to most commentators, from Chrysostom downwards, to be purposely mentioned in order to show the reality of Lazarus' resurrection. He was not a ghost or a spirit. He had really been raised to life with a real body, and flesh and bones, and all the needs and conditions of a body. Thus we are practically taught that though a man's body dies, it may yet live again.

Is not this feast a faint type of the Marriage Supper of the Lamb? Jesus Christ will be there; those believers who died and are raised again at His second advent will be there; and those who never died but are found alive and believing when He comes will be there. Then the number of guests will be complete.

3.--[*Then Mary took...anointed, etc.*] This remarkable action of Mary, which, according to our Lord's saying in Matthew and Mark, is related all over the world, deserves our special consideration.

The action itself was not an uncommon one in Eastern countries where the heat is very great, and where the feet exposed to it by wearing sandals are liable to suffer much from dryness and scorching. There was nothing, moreover, out of the common way in a woman doing this service. To "wash the saints' feet," St. Paul names among the good works of a Christian widow (1 Tim. 5:10).

The motive of Mary in doing what she did was evidently strong and grateful love to her Lord and Savior. Not only from what she had learned from Him for her own spiritual benefit, but also for what He had done for her brother Lazarus, she felt there was nothing too great or too good to do for Him. Her feelings made her anxious to do her Master the highest honor, regardless of expense, and indifferent to any remark that witnesses might make.

The extent of her gratitude is shown by the lavish profuseness with which she used the ointment on this occasion, although it was very costly. This seems indicated by her "wiping our Lord's feet with her hair," having poured on them so much ointment that they needed wiping; and also by the "house being filled with the fragrance of the ointment." She poured out so

much ointment that the scent of it filled the whole apartment and the whole house where the guests were. Anyone who knows the powerful odor of otto of roses, in the present day, will easily understand this.

What this "ointment of spikenard" was has puzzled the commentators in every age, as the Greek word throws no certain light on the question. Some think that it means "potable" ointment, that might be drunk; some that it means perfectly "pure" ointment, that might be trusted as genuine and unadulterated. Augustine thinks that the expression denotes the place from which the ointment came. The question is of no importance and must be left unexplained for lack of materials to explain it. Enough for us to know that it was something very valuable and costly. How costly an ointment might be, anyone can guess who knows the value of pure otto of roses.

I can only repeat the opinion already expressed that this anointing was certainly not the anointing which is described in Luke 7, and most probably was not the anointing of Mark 14. The anointing in Mark was two days before the passover while this was six. In Mark the ointment was poured on the head, and here it was poured on the feet. In Matthew and Mark several "disciples" murmured, but here only Judas is named. These discrepancies, in my judgment, are insuperable and make it necessary to believe that there were two distinct anointings at Bethany during the last six days preceding the crucifixion. I grant that it is a choice between difficulties, and that there are difficulties in the view I maintain. But I do not think them so weighty as those of the other view. At any rate, I am supported by the great authority of Chrysostom, Chemnitius, and Lightfoot as well as of Whitby and Henry.

What the significance of Mary's wiping our Lord's feet with the hairs of her head may be is a difficult question. Perhaps, from our ignorance of Eastern customs in the days of our Lord's earthly ministry, we are hardly qualified to give an opinion about it now. On points like these, where we are ignorant, it is wisest not to conjecture.

Calvin says: "The usual practice was to anoint the head, and on this account Pliny reckons it an instance of excessive luxury that some anointed the ankles. What John says about the feet amounts to this, that the whole body of Christ, down to the feet, was anointed."

Rollock observes that at this time Mary seems to have had a deeper and more intimate perception of what there was in Christ, and of the real dignity of His person, than any of His disciples.

4.--[*Then said...Judas Iscariot, Simon's son.*] We know nothing of this Simon, who he was or why he is specially mentioned here. It is worth notice that hardly any name occurs so frequently in the New Testament as this. We have the following:

The Apostle Simon, called also Peter.

The Apostle Simon, called also Zelotes and the Canaanite.

Simon the brother of our Lord, mentioned with James and Joses (Matthew 13:55).

Simon the leper, in whose house the anointing took place (Matt. 26:6).

Simon the Cyrenian, who carried the cross (Matt. 27:32).  
Simon the Pharisee (Luke 7:40).  
Simon the sorcerer at Samaria (Acts 8:9).  
Simon the tanner (Acts 9:43).

It would, of course, be interesting to know if Judas Iscariot was son of any of these. But we have no clue to guide us.

Wordsworth sees in the mention of Judas by name a strong internal evidence of the late date of St. John's Gospel. Compare with this the fact that John alone mentions Peter and Malchus by name (John 18:10).

[*Who would betray him.*] These words would be more literally rendered, "the one who was about to betray Him."

On the occasion of the anointing related in Matthew 26 and Mark 14, it is worth noticing that "some of the disciples," and not Judas only, found fault with the action. It rather adds probability to the theory that there were two anointings at Bethany.

Chrysostom remarks that Jesus knew from the beginning that Judas was a traitor and often rebuked him with such words as, "One of you is a devil" (John 6:64). Augustine also remarks that we must not suppose Judas never fell till he received money from the Jews. He was false from the beginning. He also says that he was present at the institution of the Lord's Supper and was a communicant.

5.--[*Why was not...poor?*] This carping question is a specimen of the way in which wicked men often try to depreciate a good action, and specially in the matter of giving money. When the deed is done, they do not say downright that it ought not to have been done, but suggest that something better might have been done! Those who do good must be prepared to find their actions carped at and their motives depreciated, and themselves charged with neglecting one class of duties in over-zealousness for doing others. If we do nothing until everybody commends and praises us, we shall never do any good in the world.

We may learn from this verse the costly nature of Mary's ointment. If workman's wages were "a penny a day," (Matt. 20:2), about 7½ d. of our money, this holy woman must have poured on our Lord's feet what was worth between £9 and £10 of our money, according to the estimate of Judas. But allowances must perhaps be made for an exaggerated statement being made by an envious and wicked man.

We may note here that giving to the poor was evidently assumed to be a part of every Christian's duty. Compare this with Gal. 2:10. In a country like England, where there is a poor law, Christians are sadly apt to forget this. The duty of "giving to the poor," and not merely paying rates in obedience to law, is just as obligatory now as it was 1800 years ago.

Ecolampadius remarks that the more wicked and graceless people are, the more ready they are to find fault with and blame others and to see no

beauty in what they do.

Quesnel remarks that Judas made a great ado about 300 pence, viz., £10 and a little ointment, when he was about to sell the Son of God for 30 pieces of silver, viz., £3 15s.

Henry observes: "Coldness of love to Christ and a secret contempt of serious piety, when they appear in professors of religion, are sad presages of final apostasy."

Stier remarks: "We have in the words of Judas an example of those judgments which have their foundation in the favorite principles of utilitarianism, and which may too often be applied falsely to the wounding of pious hearts." "This lays bare the root of that suspicion with which missionary offerings for the extension of Christ's kingdom are looked at, because of the poor whom we have at home." "We have here, furthermore, an example of all cold judgments passed on the virtuous emotions of warm hearts, of all more or less conscious or unconscious censures of the artless outgoings and acts of honest feelings, and of all narrow-hearted criticism of others according to our own mind and temper."

6.--[*This he said...poor.*] This is one of those parenthetical explanations or glosses which are so frequent in St. John's Gospel. The Evangelist tells us the true character of Judas and the reason he said what he did. He did not really care about the poor, but put their interest forward as a special and plausible argument for depreciating Mary's action and discouraging such actions in others.

There is something very instructive in this. The argument of Judas is frequently reproduced in the present day. Hundreds of people excuse themselves from one class of duties by pretended zeal for others, and compensate for neglecting Christ's cause by affecting great concern for the poor. Yet in reality they care nothing for the poor and only want to save their own money, and to be spared contributing to religious causes.

Some, for instance, will never give money to benefit the souls of their fellow-countrymen and tell us we must first relieve their property and feed their bodies. Some again will give nothing to help missions abroad and tell us we must first mind the poor at home. Even the shareholders of some great joint stock companies have been known to express great concern for the poor and working classes as an excuse for carrying on their business on Sundays. The language of St. John about Judas Iscariot shows us that this apparent zeal for the poor should always be regarded with suspicion and submitted to close analysis and cross-examination. He talked brave words about the poor, as if he cared more for them than anyone! Yet there is not the slightest proof in the Gospels that he cared more for them than others. Above all, the conclusion of the verse lets out the truth, and the unerring pen of inspiration reveals the man's true motives. These things are written for our learning. There are few greater impostors in the world than some of those who are pretending perpetually to care about the poor. The truest and best friends of the working classes and the poor, the people who give most and do most for them, will always be found among those who do most for Christ. It is the successors of Mary of Bethany, and not of Judas

Iscariot, who really "care for the poor." But they do not talk about it. While others talk and profess, they act.

[*But because he was a thief.*] This is strong language and a very heavy accusation. It seems to indicate that this was the habitual character of Judas. He always had been and always was a dishonest man. So says an inspired Apostle. In the face of this expression, it appears to me impossible to prove that Judas ever had the grace of God at any time, and that he only fell away at last. He was inwardly wrong at heart all the way through. Again, I find it impossible to believe that Judas was a high-souled and noble-minded (though greatly erring) man, and that his motive in betraying his Lord was to hasten His kingdom and to cut short the period of his humiliation. I cannot reconcile this with the word "thief."

Let us note here how far a man may go in Christian profession without any inward grace. There is no evidence that Judas up to this time was unlike other Apostles. Like them he had seen all Christ's miracles, heard Christ's teaching, lived in Christ's company, and had himself preached the kingdom of God. Yet he was at bottom a graceless man. Privileges alone convert nobody.

Ferus remarks: "Let us never put confidence in man or in any sanctity of position, office, or dress. If apostleship did not make Judas a saint, neither will position, office, or dress make you a saint. In fact, unless you first have inward holiness and have sought it from God, it may be that your office may render you more wicked."

Let us note the amazing power of the love of money. No besetting sin seems so thoroughly to wither up and blight and harden the heart. No wonder it is called "the root of all evil" (1 Tim. 6:10). However many the faults and infirmities recorded of saints in the Bible, we have not a single example of one that was covetous.

Chrysostom observes: "A dreadful thing is the love of money! It disables both eyes and ears and makes man worse to deal with than a wild beast, allowing a man to consider neither conscience, nor friendship, nor fellowship, nor salvation."

Quesnel observes that "Christ allows His money to be taken from Him, but never His sheep."

[*And had the bag.*] The Greek word rendered "bag" is a curious one. The original idea is that of a bag in which musicians kept the mouthpieces or reeds of their instruments. From that the idea evidently was attached to it of a bag carried about by any member of a company, such as that of the disciples, on behalf of his companions. Whether the common stock of provisions as well as of money was not kept in this bag perhaps admits of a question.

Theophylact says that some think that Judas was trusted with the care of the money as one of the meanest and most inferior of Christian duties. Thus in Acts the Apostles would not "serve tables" (Acts 6:2).

[*And bare what was put in it.*] The last words would be more literally rendered "the things put therein." Some, as Origen, Theophylact, Pearce, Lampe, Tittman, Bloomfield, and Clarke, have thought that the word "bare" means "took away, carried off, stole, secreted, or set apart for himself." I doubt this. I prefer the simple idea of "carrying about." It was the office of Judas to be the purse-keeper of the little company of disciples. The contributions in money and provisions of those friends who ministered to our Lord, such as Joanna, Susanna, and many others (Luke 8:3), were probably meant by the things here mentioned. It is clear that our Lord had no earthly wealth, nor His disciples. It is equally clear that His friends, scattered all over Palestine, must have thought it a privilege, whenever He came among them, to contribute to His maintenance and support. Of these contributions in all probability Judas was treasurer.

Let professing Christians note that to have money passing through their hands is a snare and a temptation. It is a snare by which many in every age have been cast down.

7.--[*Then Jesus said, Let her alone.*] This is unquestionably a rebuke to Judas, and a somewhat sharp one. It shows how jealously our Lord regards any attempt to hinder, check, or discourage the zeal of His own people. Even now, when some of His weak disciples undertake work which calls forth enmity and opposition, He can make all difficulties vanish and say, "Let them alone."

[*Against the day...this.*] The first word here would be more literally rendered "for" the day. I believe we must not interpret this sentence as if our Lord meant that Mary really knew that our Lord's burial was at hand. I think it rather signifies, "The ointment which Mary has poured on my feet, though she meant it only as a mark of honor, happens to be a most suitable thing since my death and burial are approaching. She little knew in doing what she did the nearness of my death; but, as it happens, her action is most seasonable."

Some, as Chrysostom, think that our Lord intended to prick the conscience and soften the feelings of Judas by talking of His "burial," and by the language of the next verse, "Me ye have not always." It may possibly be so. But I rather think that in both instances He intended to direct the minds of all around Him, as He had evidently been doing for some weeks, to His approaching death and the conclusion of His ministry. He brings that conclusion in at every turn now.

Some think that the word "kept" refers to the ointment having been originally got by Mary for her brother Lazarus, and that there had been a long hoarding up of it from the day when Lazarus died, and that Judas blamed Mary for having "kept" it so long and not having sold it. But this is purely conjectural.

May we not learn from our Lord's words here that Christians do not always know the full meaning of what they do? God uses them as His instruments without their being aware of it at the time. (Compare John 12:16.)

Calvin says: "Those are absurd interpreters who infer from Christ's reply



that costly and magnificent worship is pleasing to God. He rather excuses Mary on the ground of her having rendered an extraordinary service, which ought not to be regarded as a perpetual rule for the worship of God."

8.--[*For the poor...always.*] It is clear from these words that poverty will always exist; and we need not wonder. So long as human nature is what it is, some will always be rich and some poor--because some are diligent and some idle, some are strong and some weak, some are wise and some foolish. We need never dream that by any arrangement, either civil or ecclesiastical, poverty can ever be entirely prevented. The existence of pauperism is no proof whatever that states are ill governed, or that churches are not doing their duty.

Ecolampadius thinks that our Lord here refers to the poor as being His members, and that there is a latent reference to the language of the twenty-fifth chapter of Matthew about works of mercy being regarded as works done to Christ's brethren and to Christ Himself (Matt. 25:40).

It is noteworthy that in this sentence Jesus passes from a singular verb to a plural one, and seems to address not Judas only but all present.

[*But me ye have not always.*] These words show, for one thing, that our Lord's bodily presence on earth was a great and miraculous event and, as such, deserved to be marked with peculiar honor; and for another thing, that His departure was at hand so that the opportunities for doing Him honor were becoming very few. Moreover, if words mean anything, the sentence completely overthrows the whole theory of Christ's body being present under the forms of bread and wine in the Lord's Supper. That favorite Romish doctrine can never be reconciled with "Me ye have not always."

We may surely learn from this verse that relieving the poor, however good a work, is not so important a work as doing honor to Christ. In times like these it is well to remember this. Not a few seem to think all religion consists in giving temporal help to the poor. Yet there are evidently occasions when the relief of the poor must not be allowed to supersede the direct work of honoring Christ. Doubtless it is well to feed, clothe, and nurse the poor; but it is never to be forgotten that to glorify Christ among them is far better. Moreover, it is much easier to give temporal than spiritual help, for we have our reward in thanks and gratitude and the praise of man. To honor Christ is far harder and gets us no praise at all.

Augustine remarks: "In respect of the presence of His Majesty, we have Christ always. In respect to the presence of the flesh, it was rightly said, 'Me ye will not have always.' The Church had Him in respect of the flesh for a few days, but now by faith and not with eyes it beholds Him."

Zwingle observes that this sentence "excludes Christ's corporal presence from the Lord's Supper. According to His Divine nature, Christ is always present with His people. According to His human nature, He is in one place in heaven, at the right hand of God." Most of the other reformers make the same comment.

Rollock remarks that our Lord's defense of Mary in this passage must not be alleged as a warrant for extravagant and profuse expenditure in the public worship of Christians. Jesus Himself points out that the occasion was extraordinary and singular--on the eve almost of His burial--an occasion which could only happen once. This seems to imply that on ordinary occasions such an expenditure as that of Mary would not have been justifiable.

9--*[Now a great many...was there.]* We need not doubt that the news of our Lord's arrival at Bethany would soon spread like lightning, partly because Bethany was so near Jerusalem, partly because of the recent miracle wrought there, partly because of the order of the rulers to give information where Christ was, partly because of the approach of the Passover and the crowds assembling all around Jerusalem.

*[They came not...but...see Lazarus...from the dead.]* This sentence is a genuine exhibition of human nature. Curiosity is one of the most common and powerful motives in man. The love of seeing something sensational and out of the common way is almost universal. When people could see at once both the subject of the miracle and Him that worked the miracle, we need not wonder that they resorted in crowds to Bethany. Yet within ten days a far greater miracle was to take place, viz., our Lord's own resurrection.

10.--*[But the chief priests consulted.]* It admits of doubt whether the word rendered "consulted" would not be better rendered "purposed" or "determined," as in Acts 15:37, 27:39, and 2 Cor. 1:17. This is the view of Schleusner and Parkhurst.

*[That they might...death also.]* It is difficult to conceive a greater proof of hardened and incorrigible wickedness of heart than this sentence exhibits. The chief priests could not possibly deny the fact of Lazarus having been raised, or explain it away. He was a witness whose testimony against their unbelief was overwhelming. They must therefore stop his mouth by killing him. And these were the chief ecclesiastical leaders of Israel! Moreover, Lazarus had done them no harm. Though a disciple, there is no proof that he was a leading follower of Christ, much less a preacher of the Gospel. But he was an inconvenient standing evidence and so he must be removed!

11.--*[Because...many of the Jews...believed in Jesus.]* This sentence shows the immense effect that the raising of Lazarus had on the public mind, in spite of all the priests could do to prevent it. In every age people will think for themselves when God's truth comes into a land. Prisons and threats and penalties cannot prevent men thinking. Mind and thought cannot be chained. When ecclesiastical tyrants burn martyrs and destroy Bibles and silence preachers, they forget their is one thing they cannot do: They cannot stop the inward machinery of people's thoughts.

The expression "went away" will hardly bear the sense put on it by Pearce, of "withdrawing themselves from the service of the synagogue." It probably only means "went to Bethany." Bloomfield says, "it denotes their ceasing to pay that regard to the teaching of the Scribes which they formerly had done."

[*And believed in Jesus.*] I dare not think that this "believing" means more than intellectual conviction that Jesus must be the Messiah. I see no evidence that it means the faith of the heart. Yet it is probable this was exactly the state of mind in which many hundreds or thousands of Jews were before the crucifixion, the resurrection, and the day of Pentecost-- convinced but not converted, persuaded that Jesus was the Christ of God but afraid to confess Him. Hence on the day of Pentecost, we cannot doubt that many hundreds of Peter's hearers were prepared to believe. The stony ground of prejudice and ignorant adhesion to Judaism had been broken to pieces, and the seed fell into soil prepared for it.

Poole thinks that Lazarus, after his marvelous resurrection, "possibly spoke of it to the honor and glory of God," and that this excited the special anger of the priests.