

Wasted? The radical values of Jesus “A waste of money?”

Passages: John 12:1–8
James 5:1–6

Over the past 4 weeks, we’ve been examining the life of Jesus as described in John’s Gospel in order to un-pack His value-system and then compare it to our own. And what have we discovered? Well, to be honest, we’ve discovered there’s a huge gap between His value-system and ours!

1. What we often consider to be a **waste of time**, Jesus sees as a priority in His life!
2. What we may consider as a **waste of food**... food that we would discard or feed to the birds... Jesus considers worth enough to be gathered up and shared with others.
3. Although we may easily judge people (especially repeat sinners and difficult people) as a **waste of grace**, Jesus teaches us that no one should be condemned.
4. Although we may see the temporary raising of Lazarus from the dead as a **waste of effort** (he will surely die again!) Jesus understands that all His miracles point beyond this world to the final resurrection, when every trace of sin and death will be permanently overcome.

I know it’s hard to admit it, but our value-system falls short of that of Jesus, the perfect man! But, you know what? There’s more to come! In fact, if we really want to be confronted with the radical nature of Jesus’ value system, we have to take a look at His attitude towards **money**! This is the topic that we turn today as we study the story of **Mary’s bottle of perfume**, found in John 12.

Let’s pray.

Before we turn to John 12, let me ask you to play the role of a **financial advisor**. Today you have two appointments: Your first appointment is with an elderly woman whose husband died six years ago. She comes to you and says, “I’m down to my last two dollars. I have no more money. The cupboards are bare. These two dollars are all I have to live on, yet I feel as if God wants me to put them in the offering. What do you think?”

What would you tell her? More than likely, you'd say something like this: "That's very generous of you, dear, but God gave you common sense. He knows your heart—that you want to give—but he wants you to take care of yourself. He knows you need to eat. I'm sure God would have you keep those two dollars and buy food for tomorrow. He wants your needs to be met. You can't expect him just to send down food from heaven if you give up the little money he's already provided, can you? God wants us to do the sensible thing."

Your second appointment is with a successful, hardworking, middle-aged farmer whose crop production this year has been excellent. He tells you, "I'm planning to tear down my old barns to build bigger ones so I can store up more crops and goods and have plenty saved up for the future. Then I can take it easy, retire early, and maybe do some traveling and golfing. What do you think?"

What's your answer? Perhaps something like this: "Sounds good to me! You've worked hard and the Lord has blessed you with good crops. It's your business, crops, and money. If you can save up enough to take care of yourself for the rest of your life, by all means go for it. Maybe one day I'll be in a position to do the same!"

Doesn't our advice to this poor widow and this rich man seem reasonable? **But what would God say to them?** We don't have to speculate, for Scripture tells us exactly what He said. In **Mark 12** we meet this poor widow. She's the one who has put two tiny copper coins in the temple offering box. This was all the money she had. When Jesus saw this, He called his disciples together to teach them a lesson: **"I tell you the truth, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything—all she had to live on"** (Mark 12:43–44). Jesus regarded the woman as wise and a model for his disciples to follow. But, if she had come to us for advice, we would have tried to talk her out of doing exactly what Jesus commended her for!

And, what about the wealthy, middle-aged farmer? We meet him in **Luke 12**. He probably attended synagogue every week, visited the temple three times a year, tithed and prayed, as most Jews did. No doubt, he worked hard to build his business. And just like any good businessman today, he wanted to expand by building bigger barns.

His purpose was to accumulate enough wealth to retire early and have a good time. Sounds very Australian, doesn't it?

But look at what God said to this man! **“You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?”**

God wasn't very happy, was He? And on top of that, Jesus gives the following conclusion: **“This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God”** (Luke 12:20–21).

Do you see? By today's standards, the widow's actions seem foolish while the rich man's seem wise. But God (who sees from the vantage point of eternity) regards the poor woman as eternally wise and the rich man as eternally foolish. **What this shows is that, so often, our beliefs about money are not only radically different from God's but they can be diametrically opposed to them!**

How does that happen? How can we get so far off track?

Of course, money, in itself, is not the problem—for money neither good nor evil. In the past, when a farmer needed something like timber, he took his excess beef, milk, and eggs and traded them with the timber cutter who needed beef, milk, and eggs. By trading their goods, each got what they wanted. The introduction of money, however, allowed much more flexibility than a direct exchange of goods. If I someone got fifty dollars for his pigs, he could then use that money in a variety of ways. He could buy a plow from this person, two sacks of grain from another, coffee from another, etc.

It is because of sin, however, that the neutral use of money became an instrument of evil...particularly when used for power and control! This is how money became a false god; for Mammon constantly whispers the lie that it can make me a king! With it, I can take control my world! I can even control other people! (see James 5!) In the end, the god of money tries to tell me that I am over all things; even over my Creator! That's why Jesus said to his disciples, **“No one can serve two masters. You cannot serve both God and Mammon (money).”**

Now, let's think about today's story in John 12. Clearly, one its central characters, Judas Iscariot, was enslaved to the god of money! Verse 6 says it all: Having objected to Mary's extravagant display as a huge

waste of money, we're told that Judas, **“did not say this because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief; as keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it.”** In John's mind, Judas' attitude to money is what defined his character! **“He was a thief!”** Indeed, in only a few more days, Judas would show just how much he was under the influence of the god of money by asking the chief priests, **“What are you willing to give me if I hand him over to you?”** As we know, Judas betrayed the Son of God for thirty pieces of silver. The god of money ruled his heart and mind, despite the fact that he called himself a follower of Jesus!

It's a sickness called **materialism**! According to the dictionary, materialism is “the philosophy that says that physical matter is the fundamental reality of our universe!” It's the idea that **what you see is all that you get!** Materialism is the result of losing touch with God and the invisible nature of His Kingdom. It's a failure to realize there is far more to life than what our hands can touch and our mouths can taste. Judas wanted Jesus to establish a material Kingdom in Israel; one that would overthrow the Romans and give the Jews the freedom they longed for. His eyes were purely on the material benefits that would come to him if Jesus were to rule.

Judas, of course, wasn't the only one tempted to go down this materialistic path! All the disciples were tempted! And that's why **Jesus spoke more about money** than any other topic! He constantly warned His disciples about materialism and how money can become our master and be used for evil, deforming God's good intentions for humanity. That's why He encouraged His disciples to fight against the god of money. **How?** Not by becoming monks, but by using money for good! He said, **“I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings”** (Luke 16:9). According to Jesus, the only way to keep money from being our god is by spending it on eternal purposes! That is why Jesus taught them to adopt a mind-set of generous giving ...to develop the radical, other-worldly habit of using money for the benefit of others, while there was still time! For the longer you delay being generous, the more chance the god of money will take hold, convincing you to spend it all on yourself; to think of yourself (and not God) as the king.

You know, today we look back on **slave-owning churchgoers** of 150 years ago and ask, "How could they have treated their fellow human

beings that way?" I wonder if followers of Christ, 150 years from now, will look back at all the materialistic Christians today and ask, "How could they have lived in such big houses, driven such expensive nice cars and worn such nice clothes... living their lives in such affluence while thousands of children were dying because they didn't have food or water? How could they have gone on with their lives as though the billions of poor didn't even exist? How could they have 'given-in' to the god of money?" Materialism is one of the biggest blind spots in 21st century Christianity!

But, start to think what might happen if we start to radically change our attitude to money! Imagine what well-spent money can do, and what a force the church might become if we really started using our money to do good in this world! With well-spent money...

- We can show families who are struggling financially the goodness of God in the midst of their despair.
- We can show our neighbourhood the power of God's love by reaching out to the kids on the street and those living in the local apartment blocks.
- We can do things for the community...free concerts, free games, free food... as a way of communicating the abundant grace of God.

Using money for good is a radical...and very Biblical... idea! **"I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings"** (Luke 16:9)

Furthermore, well-spent money has the power to expand our evangelistic influence in this suburb and beyond—PGHS is a fine example. So, too, is the work we support in Campbelltown and at UTS. And we can have an influence in the world as well—by giving to Alfred and Alsie in China, and Andrew and Julie in Lombok, Indonesia! But think what we could do if we had more money to fund more evangelistic partnerships! Can imagine having a full-time youth worker or children's worker in our church...someone who could initiate new ideas and outreach in our area? Can you imagine how many more opportunities of outreach we could invest in around the world? This is what Jesus was talking about when he said, **"Store up for yourselves treasures in heaven..."**

But, you know, there may be an even more important thing that happens when we choose the radical path of giving generously! Although well-spent money has the power to do a great work in the

world, **it also does a great work in us...in our hearts.** Being generous refocuses our minds on the fact that our life belongs to God, not us. It says, “I am not the centre; He is. He does not exist for me. I exist for him.” Giving is a joyful surrender to a greater Person and a greater agenda. Giving affirms Christ’s lordship. It dethrones me and exalts him. It breaks the chains of Mammon that would enslave me. Through generous giving we begin to escape the forces of gravity that cause me to store up my treasures on earth and to establish a new orbit around the treasures I can store in heaven. Giving shifts my focus from earth to heaven—from self to God. This is surely what Jesus meant when He said, **“Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also!”**

So, let’s finish by going back to the story about Mary’s perfume and draw two simple guidelines from it that can help us be more generous in our giving:

1. Listen to the voice of the Spirit and give sacrificially!

Throughout the Gospels, many people fell at Jesus’ feet; but they were usually seeking to receive something from him. On this occasion, Mary comes, not to receive, but to give ...all she has—perfume worth 300 denarii (more than a year’s worth of wages)! Now surely, **this was a particularly huge sum of money from a poor, single woman like Mary.**

How do I know she was poor? Although the story doesn’t come right out and tell us, there are a few clues as to how poor she was! For example, the town in which they lived was Bethany, which means “House of the Poor”. Indeed, many archaeologists have concluded from their studies that ancient Bethany was the site of an almshouse for the poor as well as a place of care for the sick. Think about it: According to Mark’s Gospel, this unusual anointing of Jesus’ feet took place at the home of **Simon, the Leper!** Clearly, there must have been a leper colony at Bethany...in this ‘House of the Poor’ and home for the sick! And if you remember from last week’s study, it was here in Bethany where Mary’s brother, Lazarus, was so sick that he died. It is highly probable that this family of 3 single adults had moved from Galilee (in the north) down to Bethany just to care for Lazarus in his illness! We don’t really know, but it helps explain why Jesus and Lazarus were such good friends!

What is clear, however, is that Bethany was a place where the “ritually unclean” people of Israel (the poor and the sick) stopped for lodging,

being only 8 kms away from Jerusalem, because they were not allowed to go any nearer to the Temple. In other words, Bethany was close enough to the Temple so that the priests could come out regularly and offer prayers for the sick...but it was far enough away from the Temple so as not to break the Laws of cleanliness. (Bethany was also conveniently out of view of the Temple Mount, which may have also helped to make its location suitable as a place for lepers—out of sight, out of mind!)

These little bits of background information make it far easier to understand Jesus' comment in verse 8 of today's passage, where He says, **"You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me!"** This may, at first, sound callous. But the fact that Bethany was a haven for the sick and the poor of Israel meant that, indeed, poor people were always around them! Furthermore, with so many poor people watching as Mary dispensed her perfume, there would have been a huge objection, not only from Judas but from many others as well, that this expensive oil should have been sold and the proceeds given to the poor!

But, of course, that is what she did! Here in Bethany, in 'the house of the poor', a very poor woman named Mary took perfume worth a year's wages and **wasted** it... on Jesus' feet! Even today, some would call this form of generous giving "fanatical". It doesn't make any financial sense--she should have been the one receiving from Jesus, and not giving to Him! But Jesus didn't call it **a waste** at all! He called it "love." In fact, he was so moved by Mary's giving that, according to Luke's recollection of the story, he vowed **"Wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her"**.

It's interesting to note that Judas Iscariot was the Treasurer for the disciples! So often, it's those who are the most calculating who try to suppress the generous spirit of God! (I can certainly do that when I say to Kim, "But honey, can we really afford to give that much???") Judas calculated and schemed and worked out that this gift wasn't "value-for-money"! And I guess that's exactly how he approached his relationship with Jesus—with an eye on "value-for-money"! Judas lived under the spirit of cold calculation.

Mary, on the other hand, allowed the spirit of generosity...God's Spirit...to dominate her thinking while keeping the spirit of cold calculation and skepticism at bay.

She may have been tempted to stop and calculate what else she could have done with the money...how it could be used for other things. But she overcame those voices and gave in to the spontaneity of love.

Of course, true generosity is not determined by **how much** a person gives. It's a matter of whether they give fully of themselves. One person can give \$25 in an act of total devotion and sacrifice, whereas another can give a million dollars and not sacrifice at all. Again, don't calculate—just give generously...sacrificially... like Mary did; or like the widow who gave all she had! Jesus once told His disciples not to let the left hand know what the right hand is doing! His point was simple-- Give sacrificially; and don't calculate!

2. Listen to the voice of the Spirit and give worshipfully

There's a lot more to Mary's gift than the sheer cost of its extravagance. For Jesus saw, in Mary's gift, an anointing for His burial. Of course, Mary may not have had any clue about this! We have no idea whether this is what motivated her. All we know is that **she responded to the prodding of the Spirit**. And even though her actions were probably way beyond her own comprehension, she gave in to the Spirit of God and did it anyway! That, my friends, is **worship!** When Mary poured out that perfume, all she knew was that it was an outward symbol of all **the worth** that she attributed to Jesus! She believed that He was **worth** that much!

You know, I often feel like I should apologize to visitors when we take up the offertory, thinking that they might be offended. And sure, passing the plate can create some tension or confusion when it comes to a newcomer who doesn't know what to do with it, or who, at the last minute, fishes around in their pockets to discover they only have ten cents! And yet, when properly understood, giving to the offertory is as much an act of worship as praying or singing...and we certainly don't apologize to newcomers for these things, do we? **Giving is an act of worship!** After all, if the church is 'the Body of Christ', must it not, therefore, follow that if you anoint the church with your sweet-smelling gifts, you are, in some invisible way, doing what Mary did when she anointed the physical body of Christ with her gift? It's no wonder why, in Africa, it can take ½ hour to take up the collection, as people dance up the aisles with their offering! **Every time we give, we are anointing the body of Christ!**

Let me close with this one final thought. A wise man once; “A person’s treatment of money is the most decisive test of their character– how he makes it and how he spends it.” Here, in Mary’s tiny bottle of perfume stands a character test for us all. So, honestly ask yourself: Was her action a great **waste of money**...or was it one of the greatest acts of sacrifice and worship?

Let’s pray.