

Responses to Jesus

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- [0 : 0 0] Thanks so much, Beth. And if you haven't worded out yet, I'm Archie. I'm the pastor in training here. And it's my pleasure to be opening God's word for us this morning. If you don't already have it open in front of you, do get that passage open.
- It's on page 1079 of the Pew Bibles. And I really do mean that. Get it open in front of you, even if it's on a screen. Although if it is on a screen, put your phone in airplane mode. Because we know that you'll get distracted otherwise.
- Why don't I pray before we open God's word together? Let me pray. Heavenly Father, I pray that this morning you would be at work amongst us by your Holy Spirit.
- Helping us to see a much bigger picture of who Jesus is. And what he has done for us. For we pray in his precious name.
- Amen. And when my sister-in-law was a teenager, Karina is her name, she entered a competition. It was a Harry Potter competition. She had to write a letter about why she loved those books so much.
- [1 : 0 5] And the winner was going to win a trip to Universal Studios in Orlando. Very exciting. And Karina didn't win. But she was a runner-up. And 14 runners-up were given specially produced and signed copies of the first Harry Potter book.
- Those books were never released for sale. There are only 15 copies in the world, apparently. Now, last year, there was a fire in their block of flats. It was pretty bad.
- And a lot of their stuff was smoke damaged. One of the flats on the ground floor of their building was basically destroyed. The staircase up to their flat was declared unusable. And they had to move out.
- And so a few months ago, they were able to get back into their flat to get some of their stuff. And Karina had basically forgotten all about this book. And as she was looking for stuff that it was worth taking out of the flat, she found it tucked away at the back of a cupboard.
- She decided then to see whether this book might be worth something. She took it to an auction house. And last month, this book sold for £15,000.
- [2 : 1 1] Here's the point for us this morning. If she had known how much that book was worth, if she'd known how valuable it was, there is no way it would have been stuck at the back of a dusty cupboard.
- And I'm pretty sure it would have been one of the first things that she would have taken with her when they realized that their flat was that they were going to have to move out. We treat things, don't we, according to their value.
- Not necessarily their monetary value, as in the case of this book, but how valuable things are to us dictates how we treat them. When I was about 16 years old, and I remember this so clearly, I was at a party.
- I was standing at the fireplace with a friend of mine's big brother. And he was at university. I was 16. He was maybe four years older than me. And I just thought he was so cool. You can imagine, right, little Archie looking up to this guy.

And he said this. This was his advice for me. This Christianity thing is all fine and well. It's good to have faith. But just don't take it too seriously.

[3 : 14] Don't let it get in the way. You've got a life to live. And he totally missed the point, hadn't he? I didn't see this at the time. But looking back, he just didn't understand the value of the thing.

The value of Jesus at all. If Jesus really is who he claims to be, if he really did the stuff that we've been reading about in John's Gospel together, then the response to that is not, don't take this too seriously.

The response has got to be, you can give this everything that you've got. Because Jesus is valuable. There is nothing more valuable. It's worth it.

So that's where we're going this morning. But to get us into it, just notice how the passage that we've just read, and thanks so much for reading, Beth. Just check out how this is structured. If you come back to chapter 11 with me first, really quickly.

In chapter 11, we've seen over the last couple of weeks, Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead. And that's kind of a foreshadowing of Jesus' own resurrection and his promise of power over death, that one day there'll be eternal resurrection for life for us as well if we trust him.

[4 : 26] But then in verse 53, right at the end of chapter 11, they're plotting to take his life. We saw last week that Jesus would die, that it would be a death in our place sort of dying, his death for our life, the free offer of eternal life.

They're plotting to kill Jesus then before our passage starts. And then if you come back to chapter 12 and have a look at verse 10, we get a reminder in chapter 12, verse 10, the chief priest made plans to kill Lazarus as well.

That is, as well as Jesus. So either side of our passage this morning, we're reminded that Jesus is going to die. And then in verse 1, verse 1 of chapter 12, as if it was necessary, as if we'd forgotten what we read in chapter 11, this reminder, see in verse 1, Jesus is in Bethany where Lazarus lives, whom Jesus raised from the dead.

And we've literally just read that. Then again, look down in verse 9. A load of people have come to get a look at Jesus, but not only Jesus, Lazarus 2, you know, the guy, verse 9, whom he raised from the dead.

The point that I think John is making this morning, this passage is sandwiched between these reminders, reminders that Jesus is on his way to die, a death in our place sort of death, but also reminders that he is powerful over death, that with him resurrection is possible.

[5 : 59] Why does John give us this structure? Well, chapter 11, verse 2, before the Lazarus thing, John tells us about Mary, and he says that she was the one who anointed the Lord with ointment and wiped his feet with her hair.

Now, obviously, as you read through John's gospel, that scene hasn't happened yet. And I think that John simply wants to put what is to come, Lazarus' resurrection and the promise of eternal life, in the context of what Mary is going to do.

In other words, this whole section from the start of chapter 11 to the end of our passage is supposed to hang together. It comes as a package. And what we get in our passage this morning, essentially, is responses.

We get Mary's response to what Jesus has done, but we also get a response from another guy. Now, I don't know if you've ever met someone called Judas. I've definitely never met someone with that name.

I imagine it's one of the least popular names going today. We all know why. The name is basically synonymous with traitor, isn't it? Mary, on the other hand, is a name that apparently has been in the top 10 most popular names more times than any other.

[7 : 10] It's a super popular name. And that won't be a surprise. It's Mary and Judas responding in our passage this morning, responding to what Jesus has done.

And John intentionally puts them together to contrast the positive response of Mary with Judas. Before we get there, he sets the scene.

Have a look at verse 2. They're in Bethany, Lazarus' hometown. And then in verse 2, here a dinner was given in Jesus' honor. Martha served while Lazarus was among those reclining at the table with him.

So here's the setting. It's a dinner party, a kind of banquet, if you like, a celebration in honor of Jesus, a celebration in honor of what he's just done. Again, notice the reminder, as if we needed it, that Lazarus is very much alive.

But check out what Mary does in verse 3. Mary took about half a liter of pure nard, an expensive perfume, and she poured it on Jesus' feet.

[8 : 09] I remember reading that as a teenager and just thinking, that is so weird. Like, what a weird thing to do. So what's going on? Well, firstly, what is nard? And to my wife's chagrin, I know almost nothing about 21st century perfume, let alone first century perfume.

But I did some reading, and apparently nard comes from the Himalayas, which is quite a long way away from Israel. Apparently it's super rare, and we'll see it's super expensive. And half a liter is quite a lot of perfume.

This is an incredibly extravagant thing for Mary to have done. In fact, we'll come back to it, but see in verse 4, Judas tells us exactly how much this perfume is worth.

You might have 300 denarii in your translation. That's what's there in the Greek. Your translators might have helpfully converted that to a year's wages.

300 denarii was more or less equivalent to the average year's salary. Just to put that into perspective, the average salary in Edinburgh today is about 36,000 pounds.

[9 : 16] Can you imagine taking that amount of money and just pouring it out? It's incredibly extravagant. Deb, I've forgotten to bring my clicker up. Do you mind just moving the slides along for me? I'll give you a nod when to do so, and the next one, thanks.

And why does she pour it on Jesus's feet? Well, feet washing was a pretty normal cultural thing to do. You can imagine dusty roads and sandals. There was always foot washing going on in the ancient world, and especially at the start of a dinner party.

Generally, the servants, maybe sometimes the host, would kind of wash the guests' feet. But what Mary is doing here is so much more than simple foot washing, isn't it? I mean, doing it with perfume is pretty weird, but it gets weirder as we keep reading because she wiped his feet with her hair.

That's such a weird thing to do. And I think it's actually weirder than I thought because culturally, the hair in ancient Israel, it was like the crowning glory of a woman's femininity.

I mean, I know that some women today love their hair, but it's lost its symbolic freight, I think. Jewish women would always wear their hair up because otherwise it was kind of like to show their modesty.

[10 : 23] And so to let it down like this and wipe Jesus' feet is a really strange thing to do. Why is she doing it? Well, it might look weird, but it is the most remarkable display of humility and affection to Jesus.

And it is just totally the appropriate response to who he is and what he's done. Why? Because it recognizes the value of the man.

It is incredibly affectionate. If you could move the slides on, a couple did, that'd be great. And notice the effect that what she's done has on the house.

And this is an incredibly public act. At the end of verse three, the whole house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. Like just the nature of what she's done, those in the room can obviously see it.

But more than that, everyone in the house can smell it. What she's doing here, it's not a private display of affection for Jesus. It's not simply all about her and him. It's incredibly public.

[11 : 27] This is Mary's response. It's extravagant and affectionate and public. And we'll come back to each of those as we put the whole thing together at the end. But for now, I think we can ask of ourselves if we're not already doing this, as we consider how we respond to what Jesus has done and what he promises to do for us.

How extravagant and affectionate and public is our response? We'll come back and think through each of those things in turn at the end, but just keep that whirring at the back of your mind in the meantime.

And before we get there, see how Judas responds. We see in verse four, John reminds us that this is one of Jesus's disciples. He also tells us that Judas is later going to betray him, which actually John does every single time he mentions Judas in this gospel.

And it's key, actually, as we read into verse five, notice Judas's objection in verse five. Why wasn't this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? In other words, what a massive waste of money.

And let's be honest, if John hasn't just told us what to think of Judas, the temptation would be to sympathize with him, wouldn't it? Maybe that still is the temptation.

[12 : 40] I mean, 36,000 pounds, the equivalent of surely giving that to the poor is going to be much better than just pouring that money all over the floor. And notice how Judas's response is just the total opposite to Mary.

Her response was incredibly extravagant, and his, it looks reasonable, but it's incredibly cheap. See, as if to make it clear that we shouldn't be on Judas's side, John reveals in verse six, Judas didn't say this because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief.

As a keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it. He wasn't really concerned with helping the poor at all, but rather about the cut that he could take if they sold the perfume.

This is Judas's response. His words are cheap, but more than that. Where Mary was incredibly affectionate towards Jesus. Again, Judas is exactly the opposite. It's cold and calculated.

It's incredibly selfish. And of course, where Mary's extravagant devotion was public, Judas's cheap selfishness was a sly private affair, helping himself to the money bag while no one was looking.

[13 : 54] It's private. And I actually think that's the really shocking thing here. I think that's why John reminds us of Judas's betrayal every time he comes up, because it was a shock to them, to John and the other disciples.

I mean, this is the money bag guy. He'd been trusted by Jesus. In fact, he looked like a devoted follower of Jesus until he didn't. But all along, he was serving himself and not Jesus.

And it is true today that it is absolutely possible to look like the most devoted Christian, to be serving in whatever way at church, whether that's welcome and tea and coffee or teaching at kids' church or leading services and preaching, to look the devoted Christian, maybe to be busy trying to serve the poor and alleviate poverty, chasing social justice, being the kind neighbor.

Notice, all really good things to do. It's possible to do all of that and yet to fail to respond rightly to what Jesus has done in your heart, to fail to respond rightly to what he has promised to do.

I don't know where your heart is at with this as I speak. Maybe just a chance for some introspection for, I guess, a personal spiritual MOT. Maybe ask yourself this morning, are there ways that my response to Jesus in my heart of hearts, that it is actually privately cheap and selfish, can outwardly look identical to the right response for a time?

[15 : 32] But I wonder, are there ways that we know that our Christian lives are serving ourselves more than they serve Jesus? So Jesus sees these two contrasting responses and this is his verdict in verse 7.

Leave her alone. It's clear, isn't it, which response Jesus is after. He speaks sharply to Judas here. Leave her alone. As he sees straight through him, he knows that though his response might look reasonable on the surface, that it is incredibly selfish.

And as we keep reading, we get this slightly strange phrase, it was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial. Now when John tells us that it was intended, he's saying, God intended this.

Now of course, this isn't the day of Jesus' burial yet. We're getting there, but we're not there yet. But this kind of anointing with perfume was something that the culture did to a dead body.

As we've seen, this section of John's gospel is definitely making us think about that coming day, about Jesus' death. And so, what we're being told here is that God intended that Mary would perform this act of service at this time to help build that picture, to continue to point to what was to come.

[16 : 52] And so, Jesus' verdict is clear. Mary's done the appropriate thing, even if she didn't necessarily understand what she was doing. Her extravagant, affectionate public response was the right thing to do, but she didn't necessarily understand the full weight of what she was doing.

Something more seems to have been going on. I don't think she realized that it pointed to the day of his burial. And you know, I think very often we might miss the impact and significance of our response to Jesus.

In our hearts, when we serve him rather than ourselves, the impact and significance of what we do and what we say, as God takes that for his purposes, when we sing together and you give it everything and you dare to express yourself, I don't know if you realize the encouragement that you give to those around you as you respond in that way.

When you go towards that visitor and speak a word of welcome or simply just make a cup of tea or serve on tech or sound or creche or whatever else it is, as we do that, if we're serving Jesus in our heart of hearts, the impact and significance of what we're doing, we might not realize it, but it might just have echoes in eternity.

At this stage, I realize you might have got this far and maybe you're still with Judas. Like if not actually, then at least in theory, this is a massive waste of money and it might have been much better to have used that money to serve the poor.

[18 : 21] Well, Jesus continues to explain his verdict. See what he says. You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me. I think this verse, this bit here contains the key challenge of this chapter.

At least this is the thing that I've found most deeply challenging. Jesus is not saying here, let me make this clear, that they should not be concerned with the poor. In fact, Jesus is quoting from Deuteronomy chapter 15 there and when he says that you will always have the poor among you, that's not to say, and so there's no point in giving to the poor.

In fact, in Deuteronomy chapter 15, the meaning is essentially the opposite of that. And so instead, what he is saying is that what he has come to do is just much bigger than that.

His mission is the crucifixion. He's come to die in the place of his people so that they might be forgiven and live and he's raised Lazarus from the dead because he's going to rise again himself so that his people might do the same to live forever, eternally resurrected.

And this is challenging, but Jesus is saying that that is so much bigger than alleviating poverty. Do we believe that this morning? That doesn't mean that giving to the poor is a waste of time.

[19 : 33] It doesn't mean that social justice of any kind should just be shrugged aside. It definitely doesn't mean that we should just shut ourselves away and sing songs and pray in a sort of devoted huddle. Instead, what it means is that this greater purpose, the mission of Jesus, his crucifixion and resurrection, the promise of forgiveness and eternal life, bringing people into his kingdom, that this should inform and control and empower everything that we do.

And you know, I don't think that that means we should be giving to the poor less. In fact, I'd imagine it means we'd be giving to the poor more, but with this sort of mission in mind as we do, that all of it would be shaped around an extravagant and affectionate and public response to Jesus.

I began by telling you about a friend's big brother and he told me that it was a good idea to be a Christian but warned me not to take it too seriously, not to let it get in the way of living my life.

And he could not have been more wrong. This is not the first century. Jesus isn't here, at least he's not here bodily. We can't just pop to Harvey Nichols and buy their most expensive perfume and pour it all over his feet.

But I asked earlier how we were doing on this and I wonder what you thought. How extravagant and affectionate and public is our response? Well, let's just take each of those in turn.

[21 : 00] Firstly, how extravagant is our response as we respond to the gospel like this? At Mary's extravagant response, she's poured out a litre of perfume, a year's wages worth.

That's £36,000. Remember, it looks like a massive waste. Judas thought it was a massive waste. Here's what Watchman Nee, the Chinese evangelist, said that he would have said to Judas.

But if the Lord is worthy, how can it be a waste? It might be for us giving a certain portion of our earnings to the church or to the work of the gospel.

It might be refusing a promotion at work because you know the demands that that will place on your time and you'd much rather sacrifice that for the sake of the gospel. It could be any number of things.

I don't know if you've ever made a costly move like that. I bet if you did, the people around you didn't understand what you were doing. Maybe your friends and family saying things like that is such a waste.

[22 : 01] Too extravagant, maybe. But if we really get the enormity of what Jesus has done here, then the extravagant response, extravagant giving, it's no longer really uncomfortable or sacrificial or really costly to us.

If the gospel is true, then extravagance is really good. If the gospel is true, then a life devoted to Jesus is a life well lived. How extravagant is our response?

How affectionate is our response? Mary's response, not only extravagant, but also affectionate to get down on her hands and knees and let her hair down and wipe Jesus' feet, the intimacy and devotion of that act.

And again, I want us to see that if the gospel is true, then not only is this the appropriate response, but it is so good to respond like this, to express our love and affection for the one who first loved us.

Do you know, most churches across the world find our inability here to express our emotions really strange. British. And it's true that we can be very British. But loving Jesus, expressing our affection for him, it really is very good.

[23 : 14] Because what we're doing here is not just an intellectual exercise. I know it can feel like that in this sort of moment with our Bibles open and the guy at the front apparently explaining the text. But something much more is going on here.

As we open God's word, as his spirit moves among us and as he speaks to us, it's good to respond like this. It might not be in our character to be overly expressive.

I get that. That's fine. But I think we can often just use that as an excuse. And so as we respond in song in a moment's time, I wonder, will you be prepared to express your affection for Jesus?

That might be a quiet tear in your eye. It might be singing at the top of your lungs. And maybe you'll even want to raise your hands. I don't know what it's going to look like for you. But I do know that it's okay.

In fact, it is very good for us to express our affection for Jesus. How affectionate is our response? And finally, how public is our response?

[24 : 17] Mary's response, extravagant and affectionate, it was also public as the smell of the perfume diffused throughout the house. It's very easy, isn't it, to respond to Jesus privately, quietly, that sort of personal relationship with Jesus.

Maybe it's a cup of coffee in the morning with your Bible open or listening to some worship music or going for a walk on your own and taking in creation. Maybe it's pen to paper and something artistic for you.

And look, none of those are bad things. In fact, if you're not investing in your private devotional life with Jesus, then can I really encourage you to do that? Find something that works for you. But this morning, we need to see that if we limit our response to behind closed doors, we're missing out on a wonderful blessing.

The Christian life of response to Jesus is supposed to be lived out amongst other people. Yes, in church, as we encourage one another, but also whether that's at home or school or work or the club or the gym or the coffee shop, wherever it is, does your response to Jesus so completely inform how you live that people can't help but notice?

Is it public? You know, of all the implications of what Mary does for us, I think this is the hardest. Maybe that's just me, but the temptation to be understated, to respond privately, but ultimately to keep it to myself, the fear of man, of what they might think of me if I'm prepared to let my response to Jesus really inform my life in front of them, not as a show, not for the sake of people-pleasing, but in serving Jesus.

[25 : 54] If I'm honest, I find that really hard. Maybe you can pray for me in that, that my response to Jesus with my friends and my family that don't know him at the rugby club, would you pray that my response to Jesus would affect more of what I do?

That it would be increasingly obvious and public to people that as I love him and become more like him, that people might see that in me, that they might see it in you.

I wonder where your head's gone as I've asked those questions, how extravagant and affectionate and public is your response. Wherever your head has gone on those things and will be convicted in different directions, please don't do nothing about it.

We don't just do this to grow our knowledge or, as Graham was saying, to kind of have a good time together on a Sunday morning. We do it to prepare ourselves for Monday. One of the ways we do that here is growth groups.

We meet during the week in groups to think about how God's word actually applies to our lives. That might not be your bag and that's okay. You don't need to sign up to those if you don't want to.

[27 : 00] But if you think you'd find it helpful to be in a group like that, please do sign up. We'd love to plug you in. And if you are in one of those groups, as you meet this week, please be honest with each other.

Can you think about those three questions that I've asked and be honest with how you're doing with each of them so that we might be able to pray for one another as we apply God's word to our lives.

Just as we finish, remember where we started. It was with my sister-in-law's Harry Potter book worth so much more than she possibly could have imagined. If we go away thinking anything this morning, as we see what Jesus has done for us, as we consider these chapters of John's gospel that we've been in over the last few weeks, as we consider how we would respond to that, just go away with this.

A bottle of expensive perfume poured out in service of him is nothing compared to the love that he poured out in dying for us. is nothing making me happy.