

# Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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## Lessons from Bible Characters: Mary of Bethany – Worshipping God

I remember a riddle I liked when I was a child. What would you rather be bitten by - a lion, a crocodile or a snake? It brought all sorts of interesting pictures to my mind but, of course, the correct answer was "I would rather be bitten by none of them!" Now here is another question. Who do you think is the strongest person in the Bible? Some might think of Samson, to whom God gave great strength. But then he was humbled by Delilah, so was she stronger? Perhaps then, David would spring to mind. Surely the killer of the giant Goliath must have been very strong. But then Bathsheba overcame him. Well, I think if I had to give an answer then it would possibly be Mary of Bethany. In Proverbs 16:32, we read: "He who is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and he who rules his spirit than he who takes a city." Of course, today's society does not value self controlled people who quietly get on with a job, but that is exactly the sort of person that Solomon the wise was commending in this verse in Proverbs.

As we continue our look at individuals in the Bible, and the lessons that they have to teach us, we come to Mary of Bethany. Too often she has been spoken about together with her sister Martha, often to the detriment of both. Today we shall just look at Mary, in the hope that she will teach us what it means to be a true worshipper.

But first we must understand what we mean by worship. Two words are used in the Greek language of the New Testament, the most common of which, *proskuneo*, literally means 'to move towards a kiss'. Now I don't know about you, but I am only in the habit of kissing those for whom I have a real affection and respect. Worship is really the sense we have of the worth of another person, and the actions we take to show that out. Too often, we think that worship is something that we do on a Sunday morning. But we do not go to the Lord's Supper to worship Him. We go because we are worshippers already, and we want to remember Him, with praise. Sometimes we may view worship as a special part of a service, often accompanied by singing, but that is really praise, although it may flow out from a worshipping heart. The worship of God is really the sense of His supreme worth, and the extent to which that changed my life. It is something that I do every day.

Frequently in Scripture, it is a wordless act, as in today's study. Words are so cheap, but actions truly give a sense of the true feelings of the heart. You see, if I go home after work and tell my wife that I love her that is all very well. But if I then leave her to rush around doing all the work of running a home, then you might rightly question my love for her, as might she! But if you were to see me return home and immediately get down on my knees to wash the floor, or help cook the tea, well then you would get an altogether truer estimation of how much I loved my wife. There can be no more accurate measure of how much we truly think of Him, than how much we give up for Him. In the case of Mary we shall see that this was everything.

We first read of Mary in Luke 10:38-42: "Now it happened as they went that He entered a certain village; and a certain woman named Martha welcomed Him into her house. And she had a sister called Mary, who also sat at Jesus' feet and heard His word. But Martha was distracted with much serving, and she approached Him and said, 'Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Therefore tell her to help me.' And Jesus answered and said to her, 'Martha, Martha, you are worried and troubled about many things. But one thing is needed, and Mary has chosen that good part, which will not be taken away from her.'"

We do not know how Mary first came to meet Jesus, but we first read of the two of them here, and immediately we see Mary in a place of subjection to her Lord. Indeed, at its root the word subjection suggests to place oneself under the feet of another! Now this may seem very unpalatable to today's society, which seeks to assert rights and put self first. However, when we truly recognise the greatness of the Saviour then taking up a position at His feet is no longer a problem.

Secretly, in our hearts, perhaps we see Jesus as an equal or someone just a bit better than us. We may feel He has no real right to be our Lord. Mary on the other hand has already learned of the greatness of Jesus, and so it is at His feet that we find her. Indeed, it is at His feet that we find her in all three references to her. She worships Jesus, not with some beautiful song, or some profound statement of truth, but by simply taking a low place, and giving Him the highest place. No wonder she had chosen that good part!

We can only guess at what she heard from the lips of Jesus that day. Whatever it might have been, it was to leave such an impression upon her that later would lead to an unparalleled act of sacrifice. It has well been said that a position of closeness to the Lord Jesus is one that is taken and not given. There was space for everyone that day at the feet of Jesus, but it is Mary with her heart full of a measure of the worth of the Lord Jesus that finds herself close to Him. Perhaps this morning you are waiting for some invitation to come closer to Him, or for some miraculous moving to draw you to Him? If so, then like Mary, you need to come to a sense of His majesty and pre-eminence. The One who fully reflected, in perfect balance, not only the entire character of God, but also the entire desires of God for humanity, would have our hearts full of an appreciation of His greatness. This can only be achieved by systematic study of His word and then quiet contemplation of what has been read. It takes time and involves giving up other things but then He is worth it.

We next read of Mary in John 11:28-35: "And when she had said these things, she went her way and secretly called Mary her sister, saying, "The Teacher has come and is calling for you." As soon as she heard that, she arose quickly and came to Him. Now Jesus had not yet come into the town, but was in the place where Martha met Him. Then the Jews who were with her in the house, and comforting her, when they saw that Mary rose up quickly and went out, followed her, saying, "She is going to the tomb to weep there." Then, when Mary came where Jesus was, and saw Him, she fell down at His feet, saying to Him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." Therefore, when Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her weeping, He groaned in the spirit and was troubled. And He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to Him, "Lord, come and see." Jesus wept."

Now it is all very well to be a faithful follower of Jesus when all is going well, when we experience the sunshine of His presence and life's problems seem to have disappeared for a while. But here we find Mary in the middle of a crisis. Her brother had died, and not only that but her message to Jesus to come to help had apparently fallen on deaf ears. And yet, as soon as she gets the message that Jesus is calling for her, she leaves all and goes to Him. At this stage she did not know for what purpose she was being called. Could she not at least have a day or two to grieve? No! Mary would go now, for she had been called now.

What a response of her heart! Amidst all the grief, Jesus commanded obedience and she would not be found wanting. How many of us could match up to her single-minded devotion? It is so easy to make excuses when He calls us. What all the excuses amount to, though, is our feeling that it is not important enough to outweigh whatever else fills my life! Simply put, Mary's grieving could wait. Jesus' call could not and so she went. Now it is not possible to state definitely how Mary was thinking as she comes to Jesus. I think it not unreasonable to believe that a part of her at least was a bit angry that Jesus had not come sooner. "If only you had been here, we could have all been saved this trouble." If she had stood face to face with Jesus, she would have been saying that it was partly His fault. But she did not! She immediately falls at His feet, saying, if you like, that whatever she thought was of no consequence. The only thing that mattered was what Jesus said. That is no mean confession in the middle of bitter disappointment and grief.

Happily we need not conjecture what she heard from the lips of Jesus this time, as she remained at His feet. In verse 33 we read that Jesus "groaned" in the spirit, as He came face to face with the presence of death. Translated literally, Jesus 'breathed indignation'. We might well ask at what was Jesus indignant? What else but the presence of death itself! It had no place in the perfectly created world that had come about as an act of His glorious power. It was a smudge upon the portrait of creation, and was deeply offensive to the perfect soul of the Son of God.

Death had no place in His presence, and yet here it was, leaving a devastating trail of misery in its wake. It was then at Jesus' feet that Mary heard of her Master's abhorrence of the presence of death. How many, believer and unbeliever alike, have raged at the effects of death. Does God not care? For Mary, it was not until she places herself as nothing before Jesus, that she finds that His heart is so much more offended by Death's work. The grief He felt was like a tidal wave compared to the ripples of her own sorrow that had so convulsed her only moments before. If not even a sparrow falls to the ground without His concern being aroused, then let us never doubt His passionate concern for us as we pass through the valley of the shadow of death. That which causes us so much grief has aroused His righteous indignation. Death ought not to be!

The third occasion we read of Mary is in the following chapter of John's Gospel. We shall pick up the story in verse 2: "There they made Him a supper; and Martha served, but Lazarus was one of those who sat at the table with Him. Then Mary took a pound of very costly oil of spikenard, anointed the feet of Jesus, and wiped His feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the oil. Then one of His disciples, Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, who would betray Him, said, 'Why was this fragrant oil not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?' This he said, not that he cared for the poor, but because he was a thief, and had the money box; and he used to take what was put in it. Then Jesus said, 'Let her alone; she has kept this for the day of my burial. For the poor you have with you always, but Me you do not have always.'"

You can also read of this occasion in Matthew 26:6-13, and Mark 14:3-9. If we take the details of these three accounts together, we will build up a picture of the most beautiful episode of worship I know of. Not a word was spoken by Mary,

yet none could doubt the value of what she had done, and indeed, her testimony will remain forever. I wonder how many of my actions or words will stand the test of time as well as what Mary did?

As Jesus' life drew to a close, He spent much of His time at Bethany. On the evening before He was betrayed, a great supper was made for Him. This was held in the house of Simon the Leper. Who he was we cannot be sure, though some have suggested that it might have been a "community centre" paid for by a leper that Jesus had previously healed. Whatever the place may have been, it is likely that it was far more than just a private supper for Jesus and the twelve. Coming so soon after the resurrection of Lazarus, it is not unreasonable to suggest that this was a celebration of life.

There was Lazarus in the middle of things and Jesus seemingly at the pinnacle of power and popularity. What greater proof could there be of His greatness than in the living presence of the man who had been dead and buried? No doubt, the disciples would be riding the crest of a wave of excitement. The living Lazarus, the triumphal entry, the cleansing of the temple - all these made for exciting times. I think that the atmosphere would have been lively to say the least. Not unreasonably, Mary could have been forgiven for being a part of this joyfulness. After all, it was her brother who was alive again. And yet in all the celebration of life there was One whose heart was heavy. For Jesus knew that Lazarus's life meant His own death. There was a debt to pay and He would be the one who would pick up the bill. In perhaps a little over 24 hours He would be arrested, and then cruelly crucified.

Sometimes the most lonely place on earth can be in the middle of a crowd, and I think that this night of all nights, Jesus felt that loneliness, for none seemed to understand. None except Mary! Those hours at His feet had not been wasted hours in trite blessed thoughts. There she had learned to read His heart, and so she returns to His feet. This was the last time Jesus would be in Bethany before His death. Had she waited for a more private moment, she would never have done what she did for the Lord. Naturally speaking she must have longed for a more private opportunity. But in front of all the assembled guests, perhaps most of her neighbours and friends, she comes to Jesus and utterly tramples any sense of self-respect under her feet as she anoints Jesus. She brings an alabaster jar of precious perfume and breaks it, pouring the oil over Jesus' head and feet.

Some have suggested she had been keeping this perfume as a part of her dowry, to be given to her husband. If so, then in giving this up now she was jeopardising her future happiness and security. But so full with the sense of His worth was Mary, that her own security, her own happiness were of no account. This is worship. This is how much she appreciated the worth of Jesus. Judas' words show just how lavish a giving this was. Three hundred denarii was almost a full year's wages! Now I don't know about you, but I have never given a full year's wage all at one go to Jesus. Quite frankly, I don't think I could ever bring myself to do it either. I love the security money gives me too much. Sadly, that is how much I think He is worth. For all my fine sounding words, for all the songs I sing, I don't think He is worth that much. But Mary did!

So she anoints His head, as many a prophet and king had been previously. Now to all the assembled guests there was no doubt as to who the honoured guest was. Lazarus might have been her brother, but Jesus was her Lord, and where Jesus was, then nobody else really mattered. And she anoints His feet. The least part of Jesus was worth her very best attention. And then if that was not enough, she takes her hair and uses it as a towel to wipe His feet dry. Could Mary not have brought a towel? It was obvious that this was not a spur of the moment thing. She had planned to do this, so why not bring a towel? And why did she break the jar of ointment to pour it out? Well I suppose that it stopped her from having second thoughts and trying to keep a bit back for herself, as later Ananias and Sapphira would do. It is certainly a challenge to us today, when so few are truly committed to anything, as to whether we are fully focussed on serving Him in a single-minded manner.

But I believe there was more to Mary's actions than this superficial explanation. You see, I think that Mary had understood more of what was in the heart of the Lord Jesus than anyone else. Perhaps she alone had some inkling of what the next few tumultuous hours held for her Lord. In his book, *"Portraits of Bible Women"*, George Matheson has this to say about Mary's actions: "She resolves to strengthen Him by a preliminary joy, by a symbolic deed which will represent the impossibility that death should bury His influence. She takes a box of the costliest ointment; she breaks it in fragments, and pours it upon His head. It is the image of outward death and inward immortality. The box is shattered; but with the shattering the fragrance only begins. While it was whole its perfume was confined; but the breaking gave it wings – it filled all the house. The act told Jesus that He would never really be buried, and it told Him truly. It said that His fragrance would come from His shatteredness, that the perfume would spread widest where He had touched the common lot of humanity. And Jesus felt the power of the symbol. He felt that for once death might not be unworthy of man, might not be a subject for indignation."

So too the towel! Soon His body would be abused and hung up for ridicule. For sure Mary could never fully enter into His sufferings, but she had read His heart aright and would abuse her own body and become an object for ridicule. So shunning a towel she uses her hair to dry His feet. She would take her place alongside her Lord. That is the single bravest thing I read in the Bible. For when Jesus was gone, she still had to face her friends and neighbours, to listen

to the sniggers and face the misunderstandings of those she rubbed shoulders with day by day. Yet such things did not matter. Jesus was worth it and she would gladly give herself to Him, as she perceived that He would soon give Himself for her. What matter if others sneered, for Jesus knew the worth of her actions. And who better than the Father knew the worth of the actions of His own Son, though the world might sneer!

And so we come to the heart of true worship. It is not what I think of Him, nor what I say to Him. It is not even what I do for Him in terms of sacrifice and service. Surely the highest worship we can give is when we ignore our own thoughts entirely and read His heart. All that He is thinking. All that He desires. That is what should fill my heart and mind. My own thoughts and desires, righteous and sanctified though they may be, are nothing compared to what fills His heart. Mary could say by her actions that her life was of no consequence whatsoever and that only Jesus mattered. As Paul could say to the Galatians, in Galatians 2:20: "and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me." Ah! Mary how did you do it? What a challenge to each one of us to truly learn what worship is, what worship costs. Nothing can be more certain than how different my life would be if I truly had a sense of His greatness, and all that filled His heart, and then made that my entire life. Nothing, perhaps, than the sure knowledge that He deserves the highest worship from each one of us, today, tomorrow and for as long as He leaves us here. May we so live for His glory, Amen!

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