

The Perfume of Nard

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Gotthold Beck

ナルドの香り

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Luke

18:31 Jesus took the Twelve aside and told them, "Pay attention! We're going up to Jerusalem. Everything written by the prophets about the Son of Man will be fulfilled, 18:32 because he will be handed over to the unbelievers, and will be mocked, insulted, and spit on. 18:33 After they have whipped him, they will kill him, but on the third day he will rise again." 18:34 But they didn't understand any of this. What he said was hidden from them, and they didn't know what he meant.

Luke

19:1 As Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through it, 19:2 a man named Zacchaeus appeared. He was a leading tax collector, and a rich one at that! 19:3 He was trying to see who Jesus was, but he couldn't do so due to the crowd, since he was a short man. 19:4 So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see Jesus, who was going to pass that way. 19:5 When Jesus came to the tree, he looked up and said, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down! I must stay at your house today." 19:6 Zacchaeus came down quickly and was glad to welcome him into his home. 19:7 But all the people who saw this began to complain: "Jesus is going to be the guest of a notorious sinner!" 19:8 Later, Zacchaeus stood up and announced to the Lord, "Lord, I'll give half of my possessions to the poor. I'll pay four times as much as I owe if I have cheated anyone in any way." 19:9 Then Jesus told him, "Today salvation has come to this home, because this man is also a descendant of Abraham, 19:10 and the Son of Man has come to seek and to save the lost."
[International Standard Version]

Every time before I begin preaching, I always pray a peculiar prayer like this; "Jesus, please do not let the audience listen to what I am going to say but help them understand what you want to tell them through

me." The Lord will have mercy on us if we are prepared this way.

What is accentuated in the four gospels is the importance of the encounter with Jesus Himself. Why did so many people come to see Jesus? It was, of course, not because they were just curious. The people of those times wanted to come to see Jesus because they suffered from illness or loneliness, which made them lose all hope.

After all, they all came to Jesus expecting to receive something material from Him. Out of their selfish desire, they believed that Jesus would never fail to help them and they did not have to give up their lives anymore if they saw Him. There was nobody who saw Jesus and thought it was meaningless. They all thought that it was very good for them that they came to see Him and they were filled with gratitude.

As we all know, the calling of Jesus can be found in Matthew, chapter 11, verse 28, "all of you who are weary." Many people say, when they meet with each other, "I am so tired," instead of saying "hello." I hear many people saying that by way of greeting. They feel tired because things did not go as they expected, which makes them so unhappy. But look at what Jesus has promised to us: "Come to me and I will give you rest."

It can also be seen from the story of Zacchaeus, which we read last week from Luke, chapter 19. This man was very much like people living today. All he cared about was money, money, money. He believed that he would live happily and would not have to worry about anything if he had a lot of money. He actually became rich, but his heart was not fulfilled. He must have been so lonely.

Jesus, somehow, decided to come and stay at his house. How and what He talked about that day, of course, is not known. I will ask the Lord when I get to heaven.

After all, this man who used to care about nothing but money decided and announced that he would give half of his possessions to the people in need and he would pay four times as much as what he had cheated from others. It must have made him lose most of the money he possessed, but this day, Zacchaeus understood clearly that money had no meaning at all for his life.

As I mentioned earlier, Jesus lived an unimaginably busy life. People were told that they would all get something meaningful only if they came to Jesus and they would never regret it.

However, just like people nowadays, most of those people came to see Jesus expecting to receive something from Jesus. There were quite a few people who wanted to offer something to Jesus in those days, and I suppose that this situation is still the same to this date.

One example of these few people is Mary of Bethany. This woman was admired by Jesus. There was no other person who was admired like she was. What kind of woman was she? Let me read some verses from the Gospel according to Mark.

Mark

14:3 While Jesus was in Bethany sitting at the table in the home of Simon the leper, a woman arrived with an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume made from pure nard. She broke open the jar and poured the perfume on his head.

14:4 Irritated, some who were there asked one another, "Why was the perfume wasted like this?"

They thought that it was just wasted meaninglessly.

14:5 This perfume could have been sold for more than 300 denarii and the money given to the destitute." So they got extremely angry with her.

She was so pitiful that this woman was totally misunderstood. But, when people got extremely angry with her, Jesus broke in and defended her.

14:6 But Jesus said, "Leave her alone. Why are you bothering her? She has done a beautiful thing for me,

14:7 because you will always have the destitute with you and can help them whenever you want, but you will not always have me.

14:8 She has done what she could.

This was the best compliment He has ever said. Jesus must have felt so glad when He said these words.

14:8 She has done what she could. She poured perfume on my body in preparation for my burial.

14:9 I tell all of you with certainty, wherever the gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will also be told as a memorial to her."

It was the memorial party for this woman, wasn't it? It makes me embarrassed to think of what she did.

14:10 Then Judas Iscariot, one of the Twelve, went to the high priests to betray Jesus to them.

14:11 After they had listened to him, they were delighted and promised to give him money. So he began to look for a good opportunity to betray him.

Why do such differences arise between people in terms of the degree of growth? All believers of Jesus are of course, saved and have experienced the love of Jesus. Very often, we care much more about what we have to do rather than how our relationship with Jesus is, don't we? We first need to have an intimate fellowship with Jesus to become channels for Him.

When the fellowship of love with the Lord is lost, our sense of responsibility is reduced, we pray less or we even stop wanting to pray; we get tensed up all the time and get nervous about everything. A sister called Mary we just read about poured the very expensive perfume made from pure nard on the Lord Jesus. What she did was an expression of her heartfelt love. It was her sincere desire to offer everything to Jesus. As I just mentioned, no other person was admired by Jesus like this woman.

"She has done what she could." This was the judgment of Jesus. These words indicated that Jesus was completely satisfied by what she did. She experienced that it was nobody but Jesus who could provide her with true happiness and real peace. Because of this, she offered this very expensive perfume of nard to Him as proof of her sincere love. Her heart was filled with love.

At the center of the Bible is the crucified Jesus who was offered as a sacrifice to cancel our sins. The Scripture described Jesus nailed to the cross this way:

Isaiah

53:4 Surely he has borne our sufferings and carried our sorrows; yet we considered him stricken, and struck down by God, and afflicted.

53:5 But he was wounded for our transgressions, and he was crushed for our iniquities, and the punishment that made us whole was upon him, and by his bruises we are healed.

53:6 All we like sheep have gone astray, we have turned, each of us, to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

The foundation of our true joy, or its source is in these verses we just read. The holy God laid all our sins on the crucified Jesus. In order to redeem our sins, Jesus was punished on our behalf, cursed, and abandoned. We only say that it is just unreasonable. We cannot think of anything more unreasonable, can we?

Some people even think that it is irrational. When His blood was all offered, the precious life of Jesus was taken away. It is far beyond our imagination to pay such a price for someone like us who are so worthless and miserable.

However, most of us, who have encountered Jesus rejoice and are thankful in our hearts. Because Jesus took the punishment on our behalf, we do not need to be judged. We are convinced that we have already been transferred from death to life.

What we are urged to do is to fix our eyes on Jesus nailed to the cross. This the most important commandment in the New Testament. Let me read some verses from Hebrews.

Hebrews

12:1 Therefore, having so vast a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, and throwing off everything that hinders us and especially the sin that so easily entangles us, let us keep running with endurance the race set before us.

What does it mean to run? The answer is in the next verse.

12:2 ... fixing our attention on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of the faith, who, in view of the joy set before him, endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

12:3 Think about the one who endured such hostility from sinners, so that you may not become tired and give up.

Why don't we go back to chapter 18 of the gospel according to Luke?

Luke

18:31 Jesus took the Twelve aside and told them, "Pay attention! We're going up to Jerusalem. Everything written by the prophets about the Son of Man will be fulfilled,

18:32 because he (I) will be handed over to the unbelievers, and will be mocked, insulted, and spit on.

18:33 After they have whipped him (me), they will kill him (me), but on the third day he (I) will rise again."

18:34 But they didn't understand any of this. What he said was hidden from them, and they didn't know what he meant.

However, unlike these disciples, the woman called Mary of Bethany poured perfume on the body of Jesus in preparation for His burial while He was alive. Mary's heart was filled with gratitude and love. She must have done this in order to realize her one and only wish; she must have wondered how she could show her love for the Lord Jesus and how she could express her deep gratitude to Him.

Then she remembered the perfume made from nard. The perfume of nard was very expensive. It was equivalent to the average annual income of ordinary people. Or, it was as high as the price of bread that could feed 7500 people. Therefore, she could never afford the perfume for herself. She must have thought that she did not deserve it. It was even more impossible to buy the perfume for someone else.

However, suddenly, she came to believe that Jesus was the one who deserved this perfume and that it was the best way to express her love. Jesus Himself was very much pleased by what Mary did for Him. It is nothing but the perfect love that can truly please Jesus. But, what was the reaction of the other people?

Mark

14:1 "The high priests and the scribes (bible scholars of those times) were looking for a way to arrest Jesus secretly and to have him put to death."

It is unbelievable, isn't it? Hidden jealousy was changed to hatred, which made them decide to put Jesus to death. While some people were discussing how to kill Jesus, Mary was contemplating how she could prove her heartfelt love for Him, as we have just seen. She thought that it was only possible by devoting everything she had to Jesus. One of His disciples, Judas could not pass over and criticized what she did.

He blamed her saying that what Mary did was just absurd and wasteful. He claimed that there must have been a better way to use the money and it was far better to use it to feed the 7500 people in need. However, we all know that Judas did not say these words out of true sympathy or care for the poor. He thought that way because he was a greedy miser. What makes people have different attitudes towards Jesus?

Bible scholars of those days pursued nothing but their own honor as I just said. They were scared that they might lose the respect of the people. Their jealousy turned into hatred against Jesus, and they came to a decision to put Him to death. Judas only cared about money and he wanted to have as much as possible. He stole money, became hypocritical, betrayed his Master and finally killed himself.

Contrarily, Mary sincerely thought of how she could prove her love for Jesus. It is only those whose sins were forgiven by the Lord Jesus, who can truly love Him. Sins are forgiven for those who are prepared to admit all their sins, confess them, and separate themselves from them. Until they take this attitude,

they could only live a self-centered life and only care about themselves. This is a shortcut to sorrowful life.

Some kinds of people were very quick to retreat inside themselves or even abandon their faith those days, when they felt that Jesus did not care about them or they were not respected enough. Actually, it is still the same these days.

But, we need to ask this question of ourselves. Do we have true love for Jesus? Are we sincerely willing to come to Jesus and have fellowship with the Jesus? Is Jesus truly placed at the center of our thoughts and emotions? Do we serve Jesus out of obligation? Or, do we obey him out of love?

When a woman called Mary gave her true and wholehearted love to Jesus as we have seen, it pleased Him so much. Now, how can we please Jesus like she did? Mary desperately wanted to sit down at the feet of Jesus and listen to what He said. She did not just listen to His words, but she listened with determination to obey everything she heard from Him. She must have been very busy and she did not seem to have a lot of time, but she managed to make time to listen to His words.

Just reading the Bible is not enough, we need to ask the Bible. If you do not make time to ask the Bible, it is questionable whether you love Him in the true sense or not. Jesus is looking for ears that are ready to listen to His Word. The first step in loving Jesus is to listen to His Word and come close to the Lord in prayer. All other things are of no importance in our lives. They do not matter much.

Mary did not only come close to Jesus, but she talked to Him. Her only and desperate desire was to come to Jesus, listen to what He said and talk to Him. In our case, we are placing our own desires, our own plans or our worldly concerns as the main subject of our prayers, aren't we?

We are attracted by the blessings Jesus gives us more than Jesus Himself, aren't we? It is not the real love like what Mary had for Him. At first, Mary only wanted to listen to the word of the Lord, then she wanted to talk to Jesus and finally, she desired to devote everything to Him from the bottom of her heart.

She sat down at the feet of Jesus and lent her ears to His Word. Unless we stay calm at the feet of Jesus just like Mary did, we cannot live a life of prayers. Being well aware of how Jesus loved her with perfect love, Mary too loved Jesus completely without holding back anything. It was out of this love that she poured very

expensive perfume of nard on His head without hesitation.

That is to say, by pouring the perfume on the Lord Jesus without hesitation, without reservation, Mary expressed her love to Him. The entire house became filled with the fragrance of the perfume of nard according to the Bible.

Just like this, are our hearts, houses, and each assembly filled with an atmosphere of love? Actually, we find these very harsh words in this verse from the Book of Revelation.

Revelation

2:4 "However, I have this against you: You have abandoned the love you had at first."

What is the love they had at first? It refers to the fellowship with Jesus. It is to believe that we should not ask for anything other than Jesus, and we cannot accomplish anything without Jesus. If the Bible, which consists of the Word of the Lord becomes our fountain, our comfort, our strength, and our wisdom in our daily lives and if Jesus is at the center of all our thoughts and deeds, it is the very proof that the love we had at first is still there.

The hearts of the brothers and sisters in Ephesus were no longer in intimate fellowship with Jesus. They forgot to stay calm at His feet. Consequently, Jesus had no other choice but to tell them that He was not with them anymore, instead, He had something against them.

What is the love we had at first? It is the undivided love for Jesus, truthful humility, unhesitating obedience to His will, eagerness for the second coming of Jesus and having heartfelt affection for all brothers and sisters.

What is it that the Lord wants from us? After all, it is to have ears to hear. "Please speak, Lord, your servant is listening." If you have this attitude, not only does it please the Lord, but we will begin to become blessings to many other people.

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