

Day 7 The Gift of Love

“But Jesus said, ‘Let her alone; she has kept this for the day of My burial’” (John 12:7).

I haven't met anyone who doesn't like presents. Gifts are part of our lives and are a thermometer of love and generosity. It is difficult to say what we like best: giving or receiving gifts; but Jesus said that “it is more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35). I would like to invite you to meditate on a special, extraordinary gift, which was offered in an unconventional and inappropriate way for that time. Everyone there was troubled and therefore did not forget that occasion. It happens that the beneficiary of this extraordinary gift was Jesus. Few accounts, except the crucifixion and the Resurrection, are told by all four evangelists. This event is one of them. Matthew says that a woman “poured the fragrant oil on His head” (Matthew 26:7). Mark, on the other hand, adds a detail: that this woman “broke the flask” of alabaster, and Jesus describes it as “a good work for Me” (Mark 14:6). The evangelist Luke calls her “a sinner” in the city (Luke 7:37); and in the Gospel of John, a gospel that was written much later, we also find the name of this woman, Mary (John 12:3).

The Context in the Gospel of John

Some commentators divide the Gospel of John into two parts. The first part, from chapter 1 to chapter 12, is called the “book of signs.” In this first part, John presents seven signs. The first we find in Cana, and the last is the resurrection of Lazarus in Bethany.

The second part, from chapter 13 to the end of the gospel, is called the “book of glory.” The events of this section culminate in Golgotha, where Jesus manifests the glory of God.

We see how in the Gospel of John, the popularity of Jesus increases from one sign to another. The resurrection of Lazarus motivated the Sanhedrin to meet in order to decide what to do with Jesus (John 11:47-57).

The Sanhedrin decided that Jesus must die; and the disciple John, after presenting the supper in Simon's house, talks about a new decision of the Sanhedrin. It is not enough for Jesus to die; Lazarus also must die (John 12:9-11). John intersperses the report of the anointing of Jesus under this cloud of threats, showing how great the tension was when it occurred.

If in the first part of the Gospel of John we have a chronology of what happened during the first week of messianic activity, now the countdown begins during the last week before the crucifixion. “Six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany” (John 12:1), because He wanted to spend the last Sabbath with His friends, in the family where He felt at home.

Dinner at Simon's House

Simon, although a Pharisee, considered himself a disciple of Jesus. He wanted to honour Jesus by preparing a special meal. Simon bore the epithet “the leper,” because he had suffered from this terrible disease, and Jesus had healed him. At this meal were the disciples along with Jesus, other Jews, and Lazarus, who was recently resurrected from the dead. Martha is also present and responsible for preparing the meal. It is the last occasion when we meet all three siblings: Lazarus, Martha, and Mary.

If we had the opportunity to go back in time and be present at this dinner, what would we be interested in? Maybe some of us would be surprised by the menu prepared, or by the way the meal was served. Another surprise for our culture is that only men were present, and women were only concerned with preparing food and serving it. Discussions between those present could be another point of interest. Let's not forget, at the table there was someone who had spent several days in the grave, and such a thing had never happened before.

Dinner was in full swing when something uncommon, even outrageous to some, suddenly happened. A woman, Mary, enters the space where the event was taking place. She carried with her a vessel, which she first “broke” (Mark 14:3), and then she spilled the contents on Jesus. The vessel was precious, made of alabaster, and the contents were extremely expensive, “oil of spikenard” (John 12:3). A few drops would have been enough to fill the house with the fragrance of the anointing, but Mary pours all the contents on Jesus’ body. All eyes are turned to Jesus. There is silence; indignation and tension increase in the room. One of the disciples finally breaks the silence with the words: “Why this waste?” (Matthew 26:8), and John tells us who that disciple was, whose spirit of criticism was immediately taken on by the other disciples.

The spirit of criticism is still very contagious today. With mercantile thinking, Judas immediately calculated the cost of this “waste,” three hundred dinars. To have a picture of Mary’s gift, the sum of three hundred dinars was enough to provide all the basic needs for a family for a whole year. We can evaluate Mary’s gift in the context of today’s family income for an entire year. Even today, this gift would be considered extraordinary. Mary was horrified when she heard these words of criticism, and now she was afraid of how Jesus would react. Suddenly, the voice of Jesus is heard through the words: “Let her alone; she has kept this for the day of My burial” (John 12:7). Jesus not only defends Mary, He appreciates the profound significance of her gesture. Mary’s gift points to an even greater gift, the gift of Golgotha.

Two Characters with Totally Different Attitudes

The main character of this narrative, as well as of the whole gospel, is Jesus. Let’s look at two other characters who had the opportunity to meet Jesus: Judas and Mary.

Judas, a derivative of the name Judah, is a beautiful name; the meaning of this name is “I will praise the Lord” (Genesis 29:35). Today, however, this name can rarely be found. Why

was Judas bothered, and why did he create this atmosphere of indignation toward Mary and even toward Jesus? Ellen White in the book *The Desire of Ages* says that Judas was so upset that from this supper he went to the religious leaders to betray Jesus.¹ But the fact is, it wasn’t his money. It wasn’t his product. Every time an act of generosity is manifested, selfishness is already present and wants to take control. This was the case then, and it is the same today. This tension and struggle are present in every heart, including our own. We were not born with a spirit of generosity; selfishness is part of our fallen nature. It is present in our DNA. Even young children, up to the age of 2, already have a clear sense of possession. They know how to say the word “mine.” Just as parents strive to help their children give up selfish manifestations, so is God fighting with us to become like Him, full of generosity.

John the disciple adds a detail that we do not find in the other gospels when Judas asked the question, “Why was this fragrant oil not sold ... and given to the poor?” (John 12:5). John said this of Judas: “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” (verse 6). Even decades after the Gospel was written, John’s indignation is still great. He knew that the money in the bag did not belong to Judas or the disciples, but was God’s.

Every Sabbath in church today, money is put into the offering basket or sent to the account of the church during worship. This money, tithes and offerings, belongs to God, and His money also passes through our hands. Selfishness or greed might tempt us, as well, to hold on to what belongs to God. Some may wonder that if Jesus knew the character of Judas, why did He agree to let him become a cashier? God gives us responsibilities not to be overcome by temptation but to overcome temptation. He does not need our offerings or tithes. We need to overcome selfishness and criticism. “Judas had indulged avarice until it overpowered every good trait of his character. He grudged the offering made to Jesus. His heart burned with

¹ Ellen G. White, *The Desires of Ages*, p. 645.

envy that the Saviour should be the recipient of a gift suitable for the monarchs of the earth.”²

In contrast to Judas’ attitude, we have the example of Mary. Her gift exceeds all expectations. She is a model of generosity. John says, “The house was filled with the fragrance of the oil” (John 12:3), but not only the house was filled but also the courtyard. Besides the Saviour no one is more honoured in the New Testament than Mary, because Jesus said: “Wherever this gospel is preached in the whole world, what this woman has done will also be told as a memorial to her” (Matthew 26:13).

In the vessel Mary broke was all her wealth, all her dowry, all her dreams. If we had the opportunity to ask her: “Mary, was it worth doing such a thing?” what do you think her response would be? I think her answer would be: “What I did can in no way measure up to how much He has done for me!” In the Gospels, Mary can be found every time at the feet of Jesus. After the Resurrection, she is the one to whom Jesus reveals Himself for the first time. The essence of pure nard myrrh soaked into the Saviour’s body and continued to spread the pleasant fragrance. When He was mocked and beaten and hung on the wood of the cross, the fragrance of the pure nard oil told Him that there were beings in this world who valued His sacrifice.

Gifts for God

What can we offer to a person who has absolutely everything? The only thing we can offer is our love. Along with tithes, God instituted the offering system. Often, when we discuss the practice of tithing and how God treats this subject, we open the Bible to the last book of the Old Testament, the book of Malachi. In the first chapter of this book, God expresses His displeasure with the way His people treated the offerings that were to be brought to the temple (Malachi 1:8), and in chapter 3, along with tithes, the offerings are mentioned again (Malachi 3:8). The offerings in the Bible are often associated with confession of sins and worship.

The standard of giving gifts is different from that

of tithing. Tithe is our duty, and duties in the Bible are expressed in specific terms, to be clear to everyone. That is why the tithe is 10 percent of all our income. But offerings are not limited to an exact mathematical number. Offerings are determined by our gratitude and love. Mary’s extraordinary gift is an expression of her love and appreciation for God. Our offerings, not our tithe, show how much we love God. That is why Jesus told Simon, who looked down on Mary and judged Jesus, “But to whom little is forgiven, the same loves little” (Luke 7:47).

There are clear principles in the Bible that can help us to personally determine not only the quantity but also the quality of offerings. In the Old Testament (Deuteronomy 16:10, 17), as well as in the New Testament, it is said that the offerings must be according to as “he may prosper,” or the “gain,” of each (1 Corinthians 16:2) or the blessings received.

The second principle is that of the sacrifice so evident in the churches of Macedonia that the apostle Paul appreciates and presents as a model for those in Corinth but also for us (2 Corinthians 8:1-5). Jesus was so impressed with the widow’s gift, which she gave not of her abundance but with sacrifice; she gave everything (Mark 12:41-44). Every Sabbath, when we have the privilege of giving, we need to ask ourselves, “Is the gift I offer to God today a sacrifice to me?” It is not God who needs our gifts, but we need to be healed of selfishness.

The third principle is that of regularity. Whenever we participate in worship, we give because worship without giving is not only incomplete, it is also worthless (Psalms 50:5).

One Friday I was at the office when a brother came to me and asked me to lend him a certain amount of money because tomorrow, he said, “I don’t want to attend the worship service empty-handed.” Of course, he soon came and returned the amount, but I can’t forget that occasion. We need to turn daily to the supreme gift of our Saviour at Calvary.

Another offering principle is the one Jesus mentioned in the Sermon on the Mount. It is

² Ellen G. White, *The Desires of Ages*, p. 564.

the principle of God's priority and His kingdom. Mary, unlike others, had the opportunity to anoint Jesus' body before the funeral because she had made her gift to Jesus a priority. Ellen White says that "the Holy Spirit had planned for her, and she had obeyed His promptings."

The Holy Spirit still wants to lead us in giving offerings today. We can listen to His exhortations or, like Judas, be led by selfishness. Every gift we give must become a symbol of the sacrifice at Calvary. Jesus saw in Mary's gift a symbol of the fragrance of salvation that will spread from Golgotha throughout the universe. Mary gave Jesus an even more precious gift than the alabaster vessel with pure nard myrrh. Not only was the vessel broken, her heart was broken as well.

Standing in front of the cross as Mary once stood, we can say: "Lord, take into your hands

our past, present, and future. Turn our broken vessel into a vessel of honour for Your glory. Watch over us so that we do not follow Judas' example. We want to express our love for You through the offerings that we offer You every Sabbath, so that through them others will know the scent of Your eternal salvation, Your love, and Your grace."

Questions:

1. Am I happy that God has instituted the offering system, or is it something that bothers me?
2. Are there gifts that God does not accept today, and if so, what are they?
3. I am willing to decide that my offering is not out of impulse or made of sums that do not represent me. To what extent is my offering a symbol of the sacrifice at Calvary?

Children's Story: The Egg Seller

“Render ... to God the things that are God's” (Matthew 22:21).

Hellen lives in a small village and is in her retirement years, but she does not receive any monthly payment because she was a housewife all her life. She always worked very hard as a housewife, but she was never employed outside her home.

Now that she is old, her income is very small, and she has had to struggle many times with financial needs.

One of her dearest wishes was to be able to sustain mission through her money and help those who were able to spread God's Word to other people. One day she decided to put aside for God a single banknote every day, no matter what (the smallest banknote in her country's currency is equivalent to 25 cents in U.S. currency). Every day Hellen sought for ways to make just that little amount of money and prayed that she could keep her promise to God. Since she was living in the country, she tried to sell at least two eggs a day (which would have been the amount of that one smallest banknote), just to be able to put it aside for God every day.

When she saw that she could easily raise this amount, she “raised the stakes.” She decided to put aside one banknote for mission, one for charity, one for Hope Channel, and one for ADRA every single day. Even though the sum

was not very much, it was not an easy task for a 60-year-old woman with little income. Every day she would pray and ask God to help her find ways to complete the sum before the evening. Sometimes she would work for a little money or sell a few items, but God always helped her to keep her promise, and she had many wonderful experiences while raising money for God.

Little by little, she raised the stakes again, until she was giving a \$10 value banknote to each of her four offering projects: mission, charity, Hope Channel, and ADRA. She eventually reached the point of giving a \$50 value banknote for each project every week, and she has had many beautiful experiences with God as a result. It's been more than four years since she began to do this, and when she talks about it today, she always says these were the most prosperous years of her life. She has been greatly blessed all this time!

Questions:

1. Why do you think God wants us to give offerings to church?
2. How can our money help others to know Him?
3. Challenge: Try to save as much as possible this week and give the sum at church, asking God to use it as a blessing to those in need.