

How Will You Respond to Jesus? (John 11:45-12:19)

Matthew Williams

Have you ever thought you knew someone when in reality you were completely wrong or didn't know half the story? Sometimes it's a casualty of folly. Your spouse does something you don't like, and you build a hateful caricature of them in your mind to justify your bitterness and anger. Sometimes it's a casualty of ignorance. You think your friend is generally reliable, but as time goes by, you discover you didn't know half the depth of their loyalty and faithfulness.

Sometimes it's a casualty of misunderstanding. Your parents do or say something that doesn't jive with what you think love should feel like. But then you look back on their actions at a later point in life and realize your definition of love was wrong all along. Most identity errors fall into two general categories. Either we're on the wrong track, or we're on the right track but don't realize the full extent of the truth.

On the heels of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead in Ch. 11, John gives us a careful account of three different responses to Jesus. Everyone in the passage we just read thinks they know who Jesus is. Some are wrong. Some are right. Some are right in one sense and wrong in another. Whether they reject Jesus, worship Jesus, or welcome Jesus, everyone communicates the truth of who he is more than they realize.

In all three examples, Jesus shatters the finite borders of our understanding, exposing the lies and gaps in our conceptions and expectations of him. He doesn't fit in the tidy categories of human wisdom. He makes a different sort of sacrifice, deserves a different sort of devotion, and reigns as a different sort of king. Let's take a close look at John's description of how the religious leaders respond, how his own disciples respond, and how the crowd in general responds to see just how gloriously different Jesus really is.

1) HE MAKES A DIFFERENT SORT OF SACRIFICE (11:45-57)

After the resurrection of Lazarus, "many of the Jews" (v. 45) believe in Jesus, prompting the religious leaders in Jerusalem to call a council meeting. After all, it's not every day someone raises a dead man from the grave! V. 48, "What are we going to do with this man? V. 48, "If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation."

The Jewish council enjoyed semi-autonomous rule over Israel as part of the Roman empire. It was a fragile peace, punctuated by periodic rebellions led by Jewish zealots fighting for political independence. The council worried that if Jesus kept gathering people around him, Rome would hold them accountable for tolerating sedition and start cracking heads. Learning the truth about him was irrelevant. Political expediency was all that mattered.

Notice the massive assumptions in their description of the dilemma. They talk as if they have final power over Jesus and the Romans have final power over them. "If we let him go on like this...the Romans will come." All they see, all that fills their gaze, are the influence and actions of men. There's no awareness, no consideration, no attention given to what God is doing in all of it.

Every one of us is religious in the sense that we assign ultimate significance to something or someone. If you don't believe in Jesus, it means you functionally believe in something or someone else. For the religious leaders, they believed in the power of mortal men. And when something or someone other than God fills the horizon of our mind, we, like them, lose touch with spiritual reality.

But that doesn't stop our Sovereign God from accomplishing his will through their rebellious words and deeds. One of the high priests, Caiaphas, speaks up and says something absolutely remarkable. V. 50, "It is better for you that one man should die for the people, not that the whole nation should perish." Then John adds in v. 51, "He did not say this of his own accord, but being high priests that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation..."

What's Caiaphas saying they should do? Kill Jesus to protect themselves and keep the Romans out. It's a worthwhile exchange. What does he not realize? It is an exceedingly glorious exchange, though not for the reason he perceives. Unbeknownst to him, he's just declared the centerpiece of God's cosmic plan of salvation.

Acts 4:27-28. "For truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place."



What had God ordained to take place? For his one and only Son, Jesus, to die in our place. But not for the sake of protecting his people from the Romans. For the sake of delivering us from the curse of sin and death. For all who deny the infinitely glorious God the worship he deserves, the just penalty is clear. Rom 6:23, "The wages of sin is death." The guilt of our sin cannot go unpunished. Forgiveness is always costly.

So what does God do? He pays the cost for us. Instead of punishing us, God takes our punishment upon himself. Jesus dies so we don't have to die. It's scandalous, friends. It's the heartbeat of the good news of the gospel. And it wasn't plan B. It was the centerpiece of God's plan of salvation all along.

Isa 53:5-6, "He was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all."

What did Caiaphas and company think? We're going to sacrifice Jesus for the sake of political expediency. In the sovereignty of God, what was actually happening? A very different sort of sacrifice. A sacrifice for the elect assembly of the children of God. A sacrifice for a common need (salvation from sin) forging a shared union (membership in the body of Christ). A sacrifice (v. 52) that makes the many one.

Were the religious leaders' actions fueled by selfish resentment of Jesus' popular appeal real? Yes. Does a lust for power corrupt our world in countless ways? Yes. But was a human lust for power ultimately calling the shots? No! The substitutionary sacrifice of Jesus, along with Caiaphas' unwitting prophecy of the same, proves that even the wicked actions of men remain firmly under the authority of our Sovereign God.

Rejecting Jesus left Caiaphas and company perceiving a godless world where human oppression was the biggest problem (a la the Romans) and reasserting human power was the necessary solution (a la killing Jesus). How quickly we follow their example! We speak or act with fearful anger as if our boss is in control, our never-satisfied spouse, our kids, the "other" political party, the people who disdain us on account of the color of our skin, or the people who think no one dislikes us because of the color of our skin.

Human oppression is real but human oppressors are never in control. Our God is in control. Your relationship to him, not them, is the biggest issue on the table. Their power is real, but his power is supreme. And his sovereign rule reminds us that the salvation we need isn't ultimately a work of men or a more equitable distribution of human power and influence, as beneficial as such considerations may be. It's a work of God. The hope and help we need is found in the substitutionary sacrifice of Jesus who reconciles us to God and in so doing reconciles us to one another.

When men do their worst, the good purposes of God remain. The sacrifice Jesus makes for us declares as much – again and again.

2) HE DESERVES A DIFFERENT SORT OF DEVOTION (12:1-11)

The immediate reference John makes in 12:1 to the impending Passover festival heightens our awareness of Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. It also marks the timing of a dinner party Jesus attended in Bethany with Martha, Mary, and Lazarus.

Martha is serving (as always), Lazarus is at the table with Jesus, and suddenly Mary comes up and anoints Jesus with (v. 3) an "expensive ointment made from pure nard." She even pours it on his feet and wipes them with her hair. It was an incredible expression of devotion, doubtless strengthened by the care for her and her family Jesus had shown in raising her brother from the dead.

One of Jesus' disciples, Judas Iscariot, immediately objects on the professed ground of pragmatic charity. V. 5, "Why was this ointment not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?" Jesus' reply in v. 7 is a resounding affirmation of Mary's humble devotion. "Leave her alone, she intended to keep it for the day of my burial. For the poor you always have with you, but you do not always have me." Her action wasn't just permissible. It was entirely and beautifully appropriate.

First, her devotion was costly. Christian, if you tell someone you enjoy going to church, few people in our culture will bat an eye. If you say, "I've found a lot of spiritual inspiration in the Bible," most people will nod approvingly. But if you say, "I'm waiting to have sex until I get married," or, "We're going to stay in our smaller home so we can give more generously to our church," or, "I'm quitting my six-



figures job to move overseas and share the good news of Jesus in a city steeped in Buddhism," most people will think you are out of your mind.

Why? Because it feels excessive. It sounds unbalanced. It seems out of touch with the real world where economic value is king. Thievery aside, it's not hard to hear secular voices in Judas' objection. "Let's be reasonable, Mary. Isn't this a bit much? You're so heavenly minded you're no earthly good. This 'gift' of yours could have been used to address more pressing concerns, you know, the things that matter in the real world. I'm not saying you shouldn't be religious. Just don't get too radical, ok?"

Friend, no expression of devotion is too costly in light of the surpassing joy of knowing and serving Jesus. Matt 13:44-46, "The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up. Then in his joy he goes and sells *all* that he has and buys that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls, who, on finding one pearl of great value, went and sold *all* that he had and bought it." Luke 14:33, "So therefore, any one of you who does not renounce *all* that he has cannot be my disciple."

Friend, there is no such thing as measured or balanced "devotion" to Jesus as if worshiping him means including making him one concern, one interest, or one lifestyle element among all you pursue. Half-hearted devotion will not suffice. Either he is our greatest treasure, our highest joy, our supreme ambition, or he is not. There is no middle ground. There is no Jesus plus. Either we are all in, or we are not in at all.

Rev 3:15-16, "I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were either cold or hot! So, because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth." 11 ½ oz. of pure nard cost an entire year's worth of wages in Mary's day. If she had asked you beforehand, do you think I should give this to Jesus, what would you have said? How would you have counseled her? Would you have admonished her to be "reasonable" and avoid excess?

Jesus is worthy of the most lavish conceivable expressions of our devotion. He deserves nothing less than your highest affections and deepest loyalty. Not part of your time, all your time. Not part of your money, all your money. No gift we give to him can ever repay the gift he has given us. Heed Mary's example and ask the Lord,

“Father, is there anything in my life where I’m holding something back from you? Teach me to love you with my whole heart.” True devotion is costly.

Second, her devotion was humble. Mary was obviously a wealthy woman. But she didn’t pay other people to serve Jesus in her place. She didn’t send him thoughts and prayers and retreat into the comfort of her suburban home. She took a cultural crown of her honor and beauty as a woman (her hair) and used it to lavish her gratitude and affection on the Lord.

It was a deeply personal and embodied expression of love for the Savior. It wasn’t sexually inappropriate. It just wasn’t something a “dignified” woman looking to maintain the approval of others would have done. To switch settings, it was akin to passionately singing, raising your hands, kneeling down in worship on Sunday morning, or other expressions of physical devotion to Jesus that strike some as too radical.

Friend, Jesus doesn’t want something from you. He wants you. He wants all of your heart. All of your affections. All of your desires. If you possess things the world values, if you have money, power, or pronounced talents or physical abilities, and instead of seeking your own honor you devote them to making much of Jesus, to loving and serving Jesus, people will look at you and say things like, “What a waste.”

When that happens, remember the great marvel is not what you are willing to give up for Jesus’ sake. The great marvel is that you have been given the unspeakable privilege of doing anything for his sake. We don’t deserve the dignity of serving him. We don’t deserve the joy of knowing or loving him. Mary was acutely aware of that fact.

Why does John highlight the fact that she anointed Jesus’ feet and wiped his feet with her hair? Because it reveals Mary’s humility. Feet were what the lowliest servants washed. Her actions reveal, as D.A. Carson observes, her “self-perceived unworthiness.” She didn’t approach Jesus or offer herself to Jesus as an equal. She didn’t strut up and say, “Hi there, Jesus. I’d like to offer my services.” No. She laid hold of his feet. Her devotion was humble.

Finally, her devotion was prophetic. When people died in Jesus’ day, their bodies were customarily anointed with costly perfumes and spices. It was how you respectfully prepared a corpse for burial. Whether Mary knew it or not, Jesus knew



he was about to die. The time of his earthly ministry would not continue forever. Her expression of love pointed forward to the greatest expression of love the world has ever known – God himself laying down his life for us. Her act of worship spoke the truth about Jesus, including truths she undoubtedly had yet to fully grasp.

Our expressions of worship and devotion to Jesus today are no different, friend. They are equally prophetic in the sense that they proclaim the truth of his worth and value. Your refusal to retaliate in an argument proclaims his impeccable justice. Your loyalty to your spouse when a co-worker starts flirting proclaims his covenant faithfulness. Your verbal initiative in praying for a brother or sister in Christ proclaims his loving concern for every detail of our lives.

Genuine faith worships Jesus in ways that are costly, personal, and prophetic. It doesn't mean ignoring the practical needs of people around us, the poor included. Loving God requires loving our neighbor. But there's a clear order of priority. He is our first love, our greatest treasure. Other people's needs are not our master. Jesus is.

And remember, the best gift you can ever give someone is the testimony of a soul that is supremely satisfied in Jesus. For he deserves a categorically different sort of devotion, a devotion that supersedes our devotion to other things that are good, but pale in comparison to him.

3) HE REIGNS AS A DIFFERENT SORT OF KING (12:12-19)

When Jesus approaches Jerusalem, the crowd pouring out of the city gives him nothing short of a royal welcome. Everything they do and say is loaded with meaning. The palm branches waving in their hands were a symbol of Jewish nationalism. The words from Ps 118 they cry in v. 13, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord," refer in their original context to the Davidic king, the Lord's Anointed who would reign on his behalf. The acclamation, "Hosanna!" is a cry for salvation. And in case there's any remaining uncertainty, they proclaim Jesus to be "the King of Israel."

As far as they're concerned, the long-awaited Messiah who would solve all their problems, starting with deliverance from Rome, had finally arrived. After all, if he



could raise a man from the grave, is anything too hard for him? This is our moment. This is our opportunity. The king we've all been waiting for is finally here!

Or is he? At this point, Jesus does something his disciples didn't understand until after his death and resurrection, when they finally understood the true nature of his saving work, of what it meant for him to be the Messiah. He finds "a young donkey" and rides into Jerusalem on it, fulfilling in detail part of a 500-year-old prophecy.

Zech 9:9-11, "Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your king is coming to you; righteous and having salvation is he, humble and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey. I will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the war horse from Jerusalem; and the battle bow shall be cut off, and he shall speak peace to the nations; his rule shall be from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth. As for you also, because of the blood of my covenant with you, I will set your prisoners free from the waterless pit."

The crowd got one thing right. A king was entering the city. But they got everything else completely wrong. It's why most of them soon abandon Jesus in widespread unbelief and end up shouting, "Crucify him!" at the beginning of Ch. 19. They clearly wanted a king, but not this sort of king. A king who says at the end of Ch. 12 he's about to die? A king that calls his followers to do the same? What kind of king is this?

A very different sort of king. The very sort of king Zechariah promised God would send 500 years earlier. A humble king who walks in perfect obedience to Yahweh, succeeding where the greatest Israelite kings of old inevitably failed. A gentle king who rides a donkey, not a war horse, who brings peace not just in Israel but to every nation in the world. And a king who demonstrates his triumphant power not by instigating an insurrection, but by delivering his people from the prison of our guilt and condemnation before God through his covenant-keeping death on a cross.

Jesus was indeed the Messiah, just not the sort they wanted or expected. How easily we adopt the same attitude. Like the crowd, we initially "welcome" Jesus. We think he can solve our problems, correct our troubles, patch us up, deck our enemies, and get us back to enjoying the good life we think we deserve. But our

“welcome” doesn’t last long because it’s based on a total misunderstanding of what King Jesus actually came to do.

He didn’t come to make your life easy, friend. He came to give you the eternal joy of peace with God. One day, he will make all things new in a physical sense. For now he’s working to make you more like himself in a spiritual sense.

CONCLUSION

In Jesus, God makes himself known as the King of Israel, but not in a political or military sense. The height of his glory, the strength of his power, the measure of his wisdom, is made known through the depth of his humiliation. It’s victory through sacrifice. Triumph through death. Salvation through substitution. It’s the glory of the gospel, friends. And it’s what makes Jesus supremely worthy of our devotion.

The first and last responses to him in this chapter are a sober warning. Just because you think you know who Jesus is doesn’t mean you have his identity right or that you actually believe in him, for that matter. The religious leaders reject him and, in the process, say more than they realize about the truth of his sacrifice. The crowds welcome him and, in the process, say more than they realize about the majesty of his reign.

It’s altogether possible to say things that are true about him without comprehending or embracing their true significance. It’s possible to hear the truth about Jesus Sunday after Sunday but never actually believe in him in your heart. Mary’s response in the middle reveals the divinely intended effect of John’s words. She models through her costly, personal, truth-speaking devotion the essence of genuine faith in Jesus.

As Edward Klink says, “Christian discipleship involves humble service to the King, valuing all things and activities by their ability to express honor to Christ.” Make that your response to Jesus, my friend. Love him with all your heart, all your mind, and all your strength. You cannot repay the gift he has given you in himself. But you can declare to the world through wholehearted, obedient faith in every area of life just how good and gracious he is.