

Mary of Bethany

Part 1

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[00:00:00] This is a recording of an address given by Mr. James Keane at Canterbury on the 23rd of February 1963, his subject, Mary of Bethany.

Now I'm going to ask you to turn to three very well-known scriptures. The first of them is in the Gospel of Luke and chapter 10, 10th chapter of the Gospel of Luke. Luke 10, verse 38.

Now it came to pass, as they went, that he entered into a certain village, and a certain woman named Martha received him into her house. And she had a sister called Mary, which also sat at Jesus' feet and heard his word.

But Martha was cumbered about much serving and came to him and said, Lord, dost thou not care that my sister hath left me to serve alone?

Bid her therefore that she help me.

And Jesus answered and said unto her, Martha, Martha, thou art careful and troubled about many things, [00:01:06] but one thing is needful, and Mary hath chosen that good part which shall not be taken away from her.

And the Gospel of John, chapter 11.

John chapter 11, the first verse. Now a certain man was sick, named Lazarus of Bethany, the town of Mary, and her sister Martha.

The 28th verse.

And when she, Martha, had so said, she went away and called Mary, her sister, secretly, saying, The Master is come and calleth for thee. Soon as she heard that, she arose quickly and came unto him. [00:02:01] Now Jesus was not yet come into the town, but was in the place where Martha met him. The Jews then, which were with her in the house and comforted her, when they saw Mary, that she rose up hastily and went out, followed her, saying, She goeth unto the grave to weep there. Then when Mary was come where Jesus was and saw him, she fell down at his feet, saying unto him, Lord, if

thou hadst been here, my brother had not died. When Jesus therefore saw her weeping, and the Jews also weeping which came with her, he groaned in the spirit and was troubled and said, Where have you laid him? They said unto him, Lord, come and see. Jesus wept. Then said the Jews, Behold, how he loved him.

And the next chapter, chapter 12.

Then Jesus, six days before the Passover, came to Bethany, where Lazarus was which had been dead, whom he raised from the dead. [00:03:05] There they made him a supper, and Martha served.

But Lazarus was one of them that sat at the table with him.

Then took Mary a pound of ointment of spikenard, very costly, and anointed the feet of Jesus, and wiped his feet with her hair, and the house was filled with the odour of the ointment. Then said one of his disciples, Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, which would betray him, Why was not this ointment sold for three hundred pence, and given to the poor? This he said, not that he cared for the poor, but because he was a thief and had the bag, and bare what was put therein. Then said Jesus, let her alone, against the day of my burying, as she kept this, for the poor always ye have with you, but me ye have not always.

[00:04:11] Three very well-known scriptures, of course, to all of us. The three references that are given to us in connection with this person, Mary of Bethany.

And it is in that connection I want to talk to you this evening. You'll see in a measure, somewhat of where I was somewhat encouraged, particularly with the latter part of our afternoon Bible reading. For it was one of the points that I have very much in mind, and which I want to draw your attention again in a few moments. We were reminded, you know, that the scriptures are not merely there for our intellectual enlightenment, [00:05:08] they're there for our encouragement.

They are God's own message to us in the power of his Spirit.

And as such, it's an encouragement when you come into a gathering like this, to find that strangely enough, normally, naturally speaking, the afternoon directs you to one of the things that you've got in mind for the evening. Although this scripture has been on my mind for some weeks, since our brother asked me to give the address here tonight. Now first of all, of course, you all know the story of Mary, a very, very well-known character to every one of us. I have no intention tonight, particularly, of contrasting Martha and Mary. It isn't that that's in my mind.

You see, we have to remind one another, as we had to this afternoon, [00:06:04] that when you and I have said all we have to say about any scripture, well, we've just touched the fringe on it. Don't imagine, even the most well-known scripture, that you and I have got anywhere near the whole of its meaning. The depth, the length, the breadth of it is something which exceeds all our understanding, and all the time that you and I have got, both now and for eternity for that matter, to sum the whole of what God has to say. And therefore, when we are finished with a scripture like this, that we've read together so many times, there are so many different ways in which we can look at it. Tonight, I have in mind just three things that I want you to think of with me.

Now remember, the Lord Jesus, here in the Tenth of Luke, is directing our attention that as they went

through, they came to this place in Bethany, [00:07:05] where lived Martha and Mary and Lazarus.

It's an ordinary little house in an ordinary little village. That was the appraisal of that house by the local estate agents, not by the Spirit of God.

The Spirit of God draws our attention to one house, in one village, for one marvellous purpose. What made that house different from every other, was that that house was the place where the Lord was invited, and where our Lord Jesus was welcomed. And that made it different from every other. You and I are in houses today.

Is this the character of our house?

The one place, in a row perhaps of ordinary houses, but the place where the Lord is welcomed, where he finds himself atoned, [00:08:03] where the Lord goes through and he enters into that house, like we do at some houses. We knock at the door, and we don't expect to say, well, I wonder what are you doing here? People are pleased to see you, and you're asked in. And that's what happened to this house. Is that true of all of us? If one is to feel constrained, I know the majority of us, if not all of us in the hall tonight, know the Lord Jesus Christ as our Saviour. The house of ourselves has already been opened to him. We belong to him.

We belong to him because he has been invited in. We belong to him because he's our Saviour.

We're his forever.

Is that true of all of us? That must be before anything that I want to talk about tonight is of real value and purpose to each one of our lives. We belong to our Lord Jesus. For us, he died at the cross at Calvary.

[00:09:03] Have you thought of that? You've known the story of Mary and of Martha, and you've read them many times, haven't you? But you know they never knew that, that you and I can know tonight. When we are reading of them in Luke 10 or John 11 and 12, they never knew their Lord Jesus as the one who had died for them at the cross at Calvary. You and I do. What a privilege.

What a position is ours, living today as we do, in this wonderful day, the day after the crucifixion, the resurrection, the going to glory of our Lord Jesus Christ, the day of the Spirit of God coming down, to take of these things and make them good, give them a meaning, a power, a force in your life and mine. That's a privilege that was ours that wasn't theirs. But they did have this privilege of asking our Lord Jesus in, and they did, and they asked him into their house. And when they got him in, [00:10:02] and let's be perfectly careful and very, very frank, when they got him in, they treated him as the honoured guest.

Don't make any mistake.

I told you I'm not going to contrast the action of Martha and Mary, but I do want to say this, that the activity of both Martha and Mary was to give of our Lord Jesus Christ of the very best. And in fact, they were both right.

As he came into their house, there was nothing that was too good for him. And both of them, I'm

convinced of this, both of them laid themselves out to give him to realise that he was wanted, that he meant everything to them. That's my first point.

Nothing but Christ is on we tread, the gift unpriced, God's living bread.

We can't really honestly from our hearts sing that hymn without realising how far short [00:11:02] we every one really come of the words we are singing. But it's summed up in Mary with just this, that in the three instances which we've read together tonight, in each case, Mary is found at the feet of our Lord Jesus Christ. I want to sum that for you tonight in just this, that for her, there was just one person in this world that mattered, not most, that mattered all, and that was our Lord Jesus Christ. Wherever it was, whether in the home, whether out yonder by the sepulchre, or whether later when he was in the house, the Lord Jesus was the central object, the sole object for Mary.

It was what mattered in everything. That's my first thought for every one of us, that what our Lord Jesus wants is not only the first place, he wants the first, the second and the lot to the very end. He's worthy of everything that you and I have got, and Mary was there at the feet of Jesus every time. [00:12:04] Here, they made him a supper, they prepared him, they prepared the guest, and Mary is seen at the feet of our Lord Jesus Christ. But, I want you to notice one thing, an explanation of why I said I thought both Martha and Mary did their best in giving of the best for our Lord Jesus. I'm afraid in saying it, it takes my mind back many, many years ago to the First World War.

For a brother who came to visit some of us when we were in very dire circumstances and in very great need, I'll not tell you where nor when, and he came to us and read to us his tenth chapter of Luke, and looking on us, a lot of young fellows, he said to us, I want you to notice one little word that's put in here, that Mary also sat at Jesus' feet and heard his word.

Mary had done her share in the preparation, [00:13:01] but then she sat at the feet of our Lord Jesus Christ to hear what she had to say. Oh, so often what we do is to make our coming to our meeting an excuse for dodging some of the work we ought to be doing. I say this advisedly to many of our young fellows. Oh, it's so easy.

It's far better to go out to the meeting than stop at home and do some of the work that's got to be done. Mary did both.

She also sat at Jesus' feet and heard his word.

Why? Because to her he was everything. Not everything on Sunday, not everything on a Monday night or a Wednesday night, whenever your weeknight meetings may be, but the whole week through. The ordinary course of events, the ordinary work that had to be done, the one who was first in it all was our Lord Jesus Christ. For those of us who are still at work, some here are retired.

Some of us are not. We're still at work. But whether you're retired or at work, [00:14:01] our Lord Jesus Christ is the one that counts, both in your work and in your retirement. He's there. He is the one that matters every time. But she also sat at Jesus' feet and heard his word. She realised this.

Now you'll see why I'm coming back to what was mentioned to us at the close of our afternoon's Bible reading. Mary was one who realised this, that if she was to live her life as she ought, if our Lord Jesus Christ was to be first and foremost always in her life, then what he said, what he thought, was

what mattered. And the only place to get it was at his feet. Using the words we had this afternoon, the only way you and I can understand and know the mind of our Lord Jesus Christ is not staying at home mystifying, imagining, dreaming, philosophising. It's found here in his own word. And only from the word of God, [00:15:02] by the power of the Spirit of God, direct from our Lord Jesus Christ himself, can you and I gain his mind, his thought, about our lives and ourselves. Mary listened to what he had to say.

In other words, as somebody said this afternoon, not second-hand, not only what somebody else has to say, but direct from himself in his own word. For us each, individually.

Is that all? Oh no.

We were reminded this afternoon, some of us were carrying it out, weren't we? We turned up for the afternoon Bible reading. I hope we did because we were used to it. Or it's only habit.

Habit is a very, very good thing, if it's what you and I are doing, habitually, because we're living continually with the desire to know his mind. So, reading his word at home, alone, we read his word together, in company. And in the power of the Spirit of God, [00:16:01] where two or three are gathered together in my name, gathered together with me, the central object of all, there am I, says our Lord Jesus, to take of that very word and make it live in power to each one of you. Like Mary did as she sat at his feet, enthralled by what he had to say. What is it to you?

Just a Bible reading?

Only the Bible, what I've heard dozens of times? Or is it the living word from the living Saviour?

To Mary, that's just what it was.

To many of us here, as we read again these wonderful words, they're not merely words we've been listening to for the last 60, 70 years, they're the words of our Lord Jesus Christ coming from him again with all the freshness and all the power of the living Saviour that you and I know died for us and who is living at the right hand of God. We are waiting for his coming again, we say. Then every word that he has to say to us now [00:17:03] is of that which is of all importance. Don't pretend you're waiting for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ when you're not taking the trouble to listen to what he's saying now. That doesn't, that's not consistent.

Here Mary sat at Jesus' feet and heard his word.

She knew what he felt.

She knew what he had to say because she'd sat and listened to it. She knew it. Do you?

Oh, but you know, there's so much in the scripture I don't understand at all. It doesn't say that Mary sat at Jesus' feet and understood just everything he said. She heard his word.

Brethren, that's what you and I do. We sit at the feet of our Lord Jesus Christ and hear what he has to say. That understanding of his mind deepens, strengthens, widens the more you and I have to do with him. The more we see of him, the more we look towards him, [00:18:03] the more like him we shall

become, the more we shall understand his mind. The one who understands his mind is the one who has learned the most of him. And Mary sat at Jesus' feet and heard his word. What was the result?

I'm going to hurry you on, I don't want to keep you too long tonight. John 11.

And there are remarkable things he said. I'm going to suggest two things in connection with it. The first is obvious.

You know, Martha had had to do with our Lord Jesus over the death of Lazarus. And she said, Lord, if you'd been here, my brother wouldn't have died. And then when the Lord speaks to her in that gracious way he always does. Let's go back again. Mary sat at Jesus' feet and heard his word. She'd known, she knew what it was to hear that wonderful graciousness of our Lord Jesus Christ. She knew it, she'd heard it before. She sat there.

But what other people had to say, she knew it for herself. [00:19:03] But then Martha goes back and she goes to Mary and said, the Master is come and calls for you.

John never records that as having come from our Lord Jesus. But I'm not going to say Martha wasn't telling the truth, though obviously Jesus had called for Mary. But I do want to suggest something else. Martha recognised just this, that the one to understand our Lord Jesus was Mary. There are things he said that I don't quite understand, but Mary will know what he's talking about. She sat at his feet, she knew what he meant. She understood him. Isn't that true of us? Isn't there time and again when you've gone to someone who's said something and you say, well I don't quite understand them. Ask him, he's his best friend, he'll know what he's talking about. Mary was, Martha says, Mary's the one that knows.

The Master has come, he wants to talk to you Mary, you're the one that understands. [00:20:01] Mary who sat still in the house got up and went at once to our Lord Jesus. And she said, Lord if you'd been here, my brother wouldn't have died. Wouldn't have died? Same words are said by Martha, our attention is often drawn to it, isn't it? Oh, what a different emphasis. If you'd been here, he wouldn't have died. I almost dare to alter one of those words. Lord, if thou'd been here, my brother couldn't have died. The very presence of the Lord of life would have made it impossible for Lazarus to have died. That's the confidence, the faith that Mary has.

But she's there before the Lord in her need, there at his feet, making a request of him.

If I'm suggesting that Luke 10 suggests to us [00:21:02] our individual study of the scriptures and our assembly Bible readings, I'm going to suggest that John 11 suggests to us our own continual prayer before our Lord Jesus Christ and our assembly prayer meetings. And let me say this, oh I know we often say, well all you need do is to just, well just how you feel, just talk out to the Lord Jesus. Yes, that's perfectly true. But you know, unless you know him well, you can't talk to him as you would if you knew him properly. Mary's attitude in prayer in John 11 is governed by the fact that Mary had sat at Jesus' feet and heard his word.

She understood in a way that others couldn't, the one to whom she was speaking, the one before whom she was kneeling in prayer. And might I say how true that is of us? The more you and I know of him in his word, the more we know of himself, [00:22:01] the more easily, the more rightly shall we be able to be before him in prayer. Mary in her need, in her sorrow, comes to our Lord Jesus Christ.

I think of this, it touches me very closely right here. When I was quite a young fellow in the Sunday school, I'd recently left, but in the early days, and I hadn't been in a school so many years then, it was told me that a boy of mine in my class was dying and we went to the hospital and saw him. He was a chap of 11 and that boy died. And they asked to go home to see those parents, the parents of the boy who died. And there's a young chap, young fellow with a Sunday school class trying to talk to a father and mother bewildered, saddened by death and realise how difficult it was to talk to them. [00:23:05] Mary knew where to go.

Those father and mother of which I'm speaking didn't. They never knew our Lord Jesus. What a privilege it's yours and mine, isn't it, to belong to him.

What a wonderful place is ours that in our need, like Mary, for those of us who know him, in our deepest need where no one else can understand, no one can plumb the depths of our sorrow, we're sure of that, no one's ever felt like we have. There's one we know who has felt just every pang that we've felt, who knows exactly what it feels and to whom we can go in our need and to whom we can pour out our hearts, like Mary did here.

Lord, if thou hadst been here, oh, if only I could have had you here. That would have meant everything to me. Splendid if you and I know what it is to go to our Lord in prayer. A position, a place that we cannot do without.

[00:24:08] We cannot live without him.

That is not a mere extravagant talk, it's literal fact.

Our Lord Jesus in John 15 says this, Without me ye can do nothing.

And I'm going to take that verse out of the setting in John 15 and say it literally means every word it says that you and I can absolutely do nothing without him. And our conscious sense of need of him finds its expression in our bowing before him in prayer before our Lord Jesus Christ. That is an essential for every believer in him.

Not only the understanding of his mind in his word, but the conscious connection, fellowship, communion with him [00:25:04] in prayer before him.

In our need, in our joys, in our sorrows, everything be able to take it to him. Once again, wonderful privilege yours and mine to go to him for ourselves. A greater privilege still, there are two or three, yes, and there are not very many more of us sometimes, are there? I can speak feelingly.

Very, very few of us sometimes, but where those few are gathered together as a company, as an assembly, gathered together in prayer before him. Do you know what that means? Or have you missed the wonder of that? Together, together, with a sense of his presence, the conscious sense that he knows and knowing wants you and I to express ourselves before him.

Remember in John 11, the Lord knew exactly what Mary was feeling. [00:26:03] He didn't need Mary to come along and tell him, but he loved to have her there. He loved to have you and I together in the prayer meeting, opening out our hearts to him. And if we do, and we become burdened as we so often do, there's one thing you can't get into his presence and go away without doing. I don't mind

how bewildered, how struck down you are by your sorrow and the burden of the things that are upon you. You really get into the Lord's presence and there's one thing you'll be doing, what I want you to do, if the Lord will, before we close, and that's to rise to our feet and give him a real note of praise. And you can't get to a, really be in a prayer meeting, solidly, actually, before him, without praising him.

The result of our chapter, of course, is that the Lord uses his mighty power and Lazarus is raised from the dead. [00:27:02] Well, we don't always see the spectacular answers to our prayers like that. The one thing we do know, we're in conscious sense, as we're together in his presence, of the wonder of the person to whom we've been able to go. The things of which we can talk to him, half the other folk we talk to, having the time and the patience to listen. Indeed, the Lord of life and glory calls us into his presence and listens to every word that you and I say.

And our hearts rise in praise and thanksgiving to him. We can't help it.

Can't help it. No, that's why I went on to chapter 12.

For if we are found at his feet, if we are learning from him, from his words, if we're opening out our hearts to him in the prayer meeting, as we do in chapter 11, there's one thing you and I are bound to do.

The reason we don't do it as we ought, the reason why this is often times lacking, [00:28:03] is because we haven't sat at his feet, is because we haven't cultivated the sense of his presence.

We haven't been found before him as we should in prayer. And the result of it all is that worship is lacking.

Merely sat at Jesus' feet and heard his word, and our heart burned within us.

Two did on the road to Emmaus, you know, and they didn't know it was the Lord Jesus talking to them. Their hearts burned then.

When they realized and he'd gone, they just couldn't sit still any longer. Speaks for itself, doesn't it? Up they had to get.

Sit quietly.

By the way, just one thing. There was a Bible reading some, oh, perhaps five or six years ago in Hull. And quite a number of them were used to getting together at this Bible reading, an assembly Bible reading. And they were getting along quite nicely [00:29:02] and had been doing for some weeks, enjoying the things of the Lord. And there was one brother there in the meeting, he hadn't been amongst them very long, and he sat and he listened. In the middle of one Bible reading he said, Brethren, if what you say is true and it's here in God's word it must be, hallelujah, praise the Lord for it.

And the brother said to me, and an old brother whom you all know and respect, the brother said to me, he said, I've never felt so humbled in my life and I never felt so encouraged.

The wonderful things that are ours, as we realize something of the wonder of our Lord Jesus. Once again we go back to that house in Bethany.

Wonderful place that, wasn't it?

The very way in which it's introduced, you remember taking you as a tangent, I know, but the Lord led them out as far as to Bethany. It was near that little house where he went back again to the glory. [00:30:01] He had a very, very warm spot in the heart of our Lord Jesus for that little house at Bethany.

A very, very warm spot in the heart of our Lord Jesus Christ for everyone who sat at his feet and heard his word. For everyone who's been at his feet in all their need and poured out their hearts to himself. For everyone who's just come along with their little oil, their oil of spikenard, very costly, and poured it over our Lord Jesus.

He went there and there they made him a supper. Martha served and he's doing a job all right.

Mary too's there.

Lazarus is there.

They're all there.

A wonderful gathering for nobody's missing.

You remember that first day when our Lord met the disciples, there was one missing.

The second time he came into that upper room, that other one was there. [00:31:02] But on this occasion, here in John 12, they were all there, everyone.

A grand occasion, isn't it? When all who belong to our Lord are there, not one missing. That's going to be literally true, mind you. When our Lord Jesus Christ comes to call us to be forever with himself, there won't be one missing, they'll all be there, everyone. And then, then he'll have the true worship and praise of every heart.

There'll be nothing lacking then.

Crowns will be cast at his feet then.

Now is the opportunity to do it. And Mary came in with this oil of spikeness.

Many of you remember our dear brother Godfrey Knight. He came down to Whitstable to a funeral. And it was a bitterly cold day and the wind was blowing very, very much. And we sheltered under a tree as best we could.

And he said to me, John 12, this reminds me of, when we'd just come over the railway and looked along the railway cutting. [00:32:05] And the railway cutting was almost that mauve colour, you know, with that valerian. And he said to me, you know, that always reminds me of John 12. You know, the nod of the east just comes from that very plant, valerian. It's the same thing. You look at that and you

say, that was what that dear woman gave to our Lord Jesus. And every time you look at that, you think of her, you think of him, and you pour that oil over him. It's a grand thing to do. It's worth it all.

She came with this oil of spikeness very costly. That which meant everything to her.

It was the triumphant expression of the woman's life, of hoarding the thing that mattered most. She poured in every drop of it over our Lord Jesus Christ.

And the house was filled with the odour of the oil. She didn't do it for that. She did it for him.

[00:33:02] Sometimes, you know, I think we give our expressions of worship so that other brethren will say, well that was nicely put. She didn't do it for the odour, she did it for the Lord. The house was filled with the odour because she did it for him. And our Lord Jesus Christ means so much to you and to me. We pour over him our fire of worship.

When he and he alone is what matters, when he's all, our all in all, and we give to him all that we've got, we heap it all upon his head.

He values it.

And he fills the house with the odour.

You know something of it? Am I taking your mind back in your experience to some of those occasions when you've had that inestimable privilege, and it is, of being gathered at our Lord's table around himself and so occupied with himself that nothing else and nobody else mattered at all.

[00:34:03] It was just him.

And then, you and I are able to pour our vials, our odours upon our Lord Jesus Christ.

When he has the worship of our hearts, every one.

But why could Mary do it?

Had she learned how to worship? She had.

Had she gone to school to learn it? She had.

Had she been to college to learn it? She had.

But it was his school, it was his college, it was at his feet where she heard his word.

It was his feet where she poured out her heart's need and burden and found something of what our Lord was and his answer to it all. And it was that that trained her, that gave her, made her, find herself there at his feet in worship to him, our Lord Jesus Christ.

[00:35:05] And the house was filled with the odour of the ointment. Why wasn't it sold for 300 pence and given to the poor?

A paltry room like that.

Do you really mean to say that on Sunday you go up to a little place like that?

Two servants of God, both believers in our Lord Jesus, were together spending the night in a hotel.

They were kept there overnight.

And on the Sunday morning, after the Saturday night's sleep, the two of them met at the breakfast table down below and had a word together about our Lord Jesus.

And then they divided, they separated. One went to his cathedral. The other, he said, well, where are you coming? Are you coming with me this morning? She said, well, no.

[00:36:01] I'm going just where I know. The Lord Jesus is finding his place, for where two or three are gathered together in his name, he's there. And I'm going just there because he's there.

And their brother said, not the ornate cathedral, but just the oil of spikenard poured upon his head.

The house was filled with the odour of the ointment. Not many, not much.

Sold for 300 pence.

Worth all to our Lord Jesus Christ, for she'd given him her all.

That's your privilege and mine.

Let me remind you, don't forget the Bible reading. We were reminded of it this afternoon. And oh, please don't forget the prayer meeting, or you'll never be able to give him his worship, [00:37:01] that which is his due on the Lord's day.