



Sermon Outline

SEASON FOUR - THE CLEARLY BEST—AND THE MERELY GOOD

JOHN 12:1-8

COME
And SEE

The
CHOSEN



The Clearly Best—and the Merely Good

This resource helps you tell the story of Mary of Bethany anointing Jesus—a moment recorded in John 12:1-8 (see also Matthew 26:6-13 and Mark 14:3-9). It includes a clip to show the congregation (from Season 4, Episode Eight), a suggested script for setting the scene before you show the clip, and a short sermon outline with main teaching points and pastoral prompts.

Sermon Title: The Clearly Best—and the Merely Good

Text: John 12:1-8

Dominant Thought: Don't trade what's clearly best for what's at best merely good.

[Download the Episode Clip: Mary of Bethany Anoints Jesus](#)

Setting the Scene (suggested script)

In John 12, where we find ourselves at the start of Holy Week, Jesus heads to Bethany, a small town just two miles southeast of Jerusalem. When he arrives, a dinner's held in his honor, and something unexpected happens right in the middle of it—as we'll see in a moment via a clip from Season 4 of *The Chosen*. First, I want to set the scene a bit for you. You're going to notice that the creators of *The Chosen* have imagined that some Pharisees were there at the dinner and that—as usual—they were in deep debate with Jesus. One Pharisee in particular, a man named Shmuel <note: pronounced *shmoo-ell*>, is growing exasperated with Jesus's seemingly nonchalant approach to the law and who ought to be loved—or perhaps better put, who ought to be left *unloved*. But just when Shmuel's about to push back once again on Jesus's teaching, he's interrupted by someone suddenly entering the room...

***If you've never introduced your congregation to The Chosen, here is a slightly different first half of the script:** In John 12—late in Jesus's public ministry—Jesus heads to Bethany, a small town just southeast of Jerusalem. And when he arrives, a dinner's held in his honor, and something unexpected happens right in the middle of it—which we'll watch together via a clip from Season 4 of *The Chosen*, a TV series about the life of Jesus and those who followed him. First, I want to set the scene just a bit...

Sermon Outline

Introduction

*Show the clip from *The Chosen*, using the suggested script above to set the scene.

*After showing the clip, consider reading the text on which it's based—John 12:1-8. You could transition from the showing of the clip to the reading of the text by saying something like: "I know we just watched this unfold, but let's listen to it, too. Here's the story as told by John in John 12:1-8..."

*After reading John's account, you could transition to the sermon proper with a word similar to this: "We know this: there are things in the world that are good in and of themselves. And these good things in the world are there for the taking, and there are folks in and all around this text—and in and all around the scene from *The Chosen*—who are looking to take hold of such good things."

Sermon Body

I. There are good things for the taking—but they're *merely* good.

***If you re-read the third asterisk in the Introduction, you'll see that the first half of this first subpoint is stated right away ("there's good in the world for the taking"). In the teaching point that follows, you'll see that the second part ("but it's merely good") comes later.**

Main Teaching Point: Starting *in* the text—and in the scene from *The Chosen*—notice that Judas wants a little more money. Generally speaking, money, in and of itself, is "fine" and even good. And how about those Pharisees that the creators of *The Chosen* invite into the scene? What about someone like Shmuel? He's in pursuit of a right standing before God—wants to take hold of obedience. Going a step further, Shmuel, the other religious leaders, and seemingly

Judas, too, want to finance and oversee a ministry of compassion. We'd all agree that *that's* good! And then moving *outside* the text and on into the rest of Holy Week, we find folks who are looking to get a better standing, a spot of comfort, more security—even the warmth of a fire, a wink or two of sleep, or a little peace and quiet. All good things! But when you place all of these good things alongside so much else that's offered up in this final stretch of John's gospel—alongside sacrifice, Resurrection, forgiveness, and Jesus himself—you can't help but admit that all the good things folks are in pursuit of are better spoken of as *merely* good. Even if it's uncomfortable to wrestle through, you can't help but admit that when all is said and done, there are good things, and then there's better—and even *best*.

Pastoral Prompt: We're in pursuit of good things—things like money, comfort, security, warmth, rest, a little peace and quiet. We would like to take hold of obedience and righteousness. We want to be known for our compassion—our own great stand for justice. We're in pursuit of good things, and that's "just fine." Let's affirm these things as good. *But let's not affirm them as first and foremost.* They are ever and always *second*. And we know this not only because we know that there is much more that is better—that there is even a *best*, as has been mentioned. We *also* know these things are merely good, because they're so fleeting, so fickle—they come, and they go. Still, even armed with this awareness of the better and the best, we desperately want what is merely good. And it is *costly*.

II. Taking what's merely good often involves trading what's clearly best.

Main Teaching Point: So many of the people who populate what unfolds within and around the text—and within and around the scene from *The Chosen*—are in pursuit of good things, and again and again we find them *taking hold* of these good things. We watch them get exactly what they want. Judas gets his money. The disciples get their comfort and security—and even a bit of sleep. Peter gets his warmth at the foot of a charcoal fire. Pilate gets his peace and quiet. The religious leaders get (or retain) their social standing, and they even seem to get at least a *form* of righteousness. But for every instance of getting, there is a giving. Every gain brings with it a loss. Each taking involves a trade. And what's given over is Jesus. What's lost is the way of Jesus. What's traded for the merely good is nothing less than the very best. Which is why we find the disciples scattering and hiding and grieving—chief among them, Peter, who's weeping in a back alley. It's why we see Pilate scrubbing his hands. It's why the religious leaders stand with their mouths agape as the temple curtain is torn in two and

storm clouds swirl. It's why we find Judas throwing thirty pieces of silver to the wind before he steals away his own life. The very best has been given up for what's at best merely good.

Pastoral Prompt: To be clear, it doesn't happen every time we take hold of the good we've pursued, but it happens far more than we care to admit: when we get, we find we've given far more than we should. Our gain often comes with a loss. The taking comes in the wake of a trade. And like the ones who populate Holy Week, we've given over Jesus; we've lost his way. Perhaps it was in something we said while the getting was good. Maybe it was in something we did. Maybe still it was in what we didn't say or didn't do. But in it all, we traded the very best for what is merely good—for what is fleeting and fickle; what comes and goes.

Transition

Main Teaching Point: Many within and around the text and the scene from *The Chosen* are looking to get something—to trade what's clearly best to take hold of the merely good. *Many*, but not *all*. Mary of Bethany stands in stark contrast. She looks only to give, not get. She offers up pure spikenard, a perfumed ointment worth an entire year's salary. To do so, she shatters an alabaster flask, good and of great worth itself. And if you were watching the scene from *The Chosen* carefully, it's worth noting that to do all of this, she broke free from the social norms of the ancient Jewish world. As a woman in the ancient world - as someone who was to be silent and away in the shadows - Mary boldly approached Jesus. She gave up the security of social standing and place. But Mary knew that all of these things—the spikenard, the flask, the right standing—were *merely* good when compared to the one who is clearly best. She stands in contrast to the many others as someone who wouldn't even *entertain* trade talks.

Pastoral Prompt: Mary's example offers a challenge to all around her—and to us, too: don't trade what's clearly best for what's at best merely good. But how is it that this woman clings to Jesus with a white-knuckled tenacity? It'd be good to find an answer, given we far prefer looking more like her than most anyone else who populates Holy Week. How can we be a people who wouldn't even *entertain* trade talks?

III. Knowing what's clearly best helps control the trading of what's clearly best.

Main Teaching Point / Pastoral Prompt: How can we be a people like Mary of Bethany—a people who wouldn't ever trade what's clearly best for what's merely good? The answer is simple: we must know as Mary knew. She knew she was in the presence of the one who's clearly best. You can see it in one seemingly small detail that's included in the other gospel passages that cover this event: Mary poured the perfumed ointment over top Jesus's head, an act most often reserved for royalty in the ancient world. <Note: The fact that John emphasizes the anointing of Jesus's feet does not preclude the possibility of her starting with his head.> She *knew* Jesus was king. And—this is so obvious that it feels almost silly to include—Mary *knew* Jesus was clearly best because she was the kind of person who took the necessary time to even *know*. Remember that this is Mary, sister of Martha. Remember how it was at another dinner—recorded in Luke 10:38-42— that while Martha fretted about in work, Mary “chose the good portion,” sitting at the feet of Jesus, a student with their teacher, taking in his words and taking in *him*. She knew who Jesus was (king! clearly best!), because she'd known his teaching through and through, his miracles (including the coaxing of her brother from the tomb) through and through—she'd known *him* through and through—and this deep, abiding, working knowledge put to rest any talk of a trade.

Pastoral Prompt: We want to look like Mary—to look like someone who would never trade what's clearly best for what's at best merely good. This means we have to work to deeply know just as Mary deeply knew. Aching to commission a people to remain faithful to Christ, the Puritan Richard Sibbes offered one clarion plea: “Study the excellencies of Jesus.” *That's* what we'll need to do—which is what Mary knew needed done. What it looks like for each of us will vary, ranging from the stuff of Gospel reading plans, worship (corporate and personal), spiritual disciplines, living in deep community with other disciples, maybe even watching *The Chosen*. It will vary from person to person. But what doesn't vary is this: We must sit at his feet. We must work to hear his words. We must work to let his miracles bear witness to us. We must work simply to behold him. This, that we might know and—like Mary—hold fast to him with a white-knuckled tenacity.

Conclusion

*According to the tradition of your particular congregation, you might allow the conclusion of the sermon to serve as a transition to a time of Communion. You could say something along the lines of: "Our text had us looking in on a dinner scene. We're now entering our own time at a table to take part in a meal. One way we remember, and thus one way we can be sure to *know* who Jesus is—that he is king, that he is best—is through the bread, through the cup. John points out in his gospel that the anointing by Mary was a preparation for Jesus's death. She seemed not only to know that Jesus was king, but that he was a king willing to lay down his life. A king is best among the people, but Jesus was the very best of kings *for* the people."

*An alternative to the above is for you to allow the conclusion of the sermon to serve as a transition to a time of offering. You could say something along the lines of: "Just as important as our working to know that Jesus and his way are clearly best, is our working to know that all else is at best merely good—and even that some things are *bad*—that we might ever and always hold to these things loosely, and to even look to give up anything that might keep us from holding on to Jesus as clearly best with a white-knuckled tenacity. The time we're entering into—a time of offering—allows us to let go of some things that, while good, are *merely* good and can be given for him, for others."

