

FREE EXPRESSION: OUR RESPONSE TO GRACE

The obedience which glorifies God most beautifully is that which grows out of appreciation for what He has done for us. The loving response to His grace is a spontaneous overflowing of devotion. Undemanded, unrehearsed, and extravagant expressions gained Jesus' attention and received His commendation. The narratives concerning three women illustrate this and serve as examples to us. As we review these narratives, we may see how our efforts to praise Him may be free expressions rising as an aromatic incense toward His throne.

1. On the sixth day before the Passover, they made a supper for Jesus (John 12:1-11; Mark 14:3-9; Matthew 26:6-13). Mary took a pound of pure nard and anointed the head and feet of Jesus. The nard was worth three hundred denarii, about a year's wages for a laborer. Thus it was a very extravagant expression. As the fragrance filled the house, it got the attention of everyone.

While Mary is the center of attention, let's interview her. "Mary, why did you do that?"

"I just felt like doing it," she answers with a glow in her countenance.

"Were you commanded to do it?"

"Certainly not!" she denies with a note of protest in her voice.

"Then don't you think that your action was presumptuous? If Jesus had wanted such a thing done, wouldn't He have told you to do it?"

"It is never presumptuous to express love to Him. Even that nard could not convey the real depth of my feeling for Him."

"But, Mary, wasn't that a big waste?"

"Sir, nothing is too big or wasted if it will let Him know how I love Him and if it will lift Him up in honor before others." Love is extravagant in its expressions.

"Don't you feel a bit guilty about it all, Mary?"

"No, I feel much happier. I felt bad until now because I had not communicated my love adequately."

"It was just for a big show!"

"Yes, I did it for show. I wanted to show Him and all of you my appreciation for Jesus."

“One more question, Mary. Wouldn’t it have been more sensible to have used just a little of the perfume and to have saved the rest?”

“Love is not applied by an eye-dropper. Love is truly unselfish. It must be unmeasured.”

The disciples joined Judas in scolding Mary for her action. How sad it is that we must demoralize those who do generous things simply because they do not meet our prejudicial notions. How chagrined the disciples must have been to hear Jesus intervene in Mary’s defense, “Let her alone; why do you trouble her? She has done a beautiful thing to me. She has done what she could. Wherever the gospel is preached in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her.”

Mary’s gift was beyond all practical value. Jesus recognized the value of aesthetic things. To lift our morale, we spend much money on beauty in clothes, houses, cars, gifts, pictures, and flowers.

Sadi, a sheik who lived 700 years ago, understood this:

“If of thy mortal goods thou art bereft,

And from thy slender store

Two loaves alone to thee are left,

Sell one, and with the dole

Buy hyacinths to feed thy soul.”

Often we hear the disciples join with Judas when someone wants to add a little beauty to our church buildings.

Mary’s response was to grace, not law. The Rich Young Ruler is to be commended for his law-keeping, but he did not have the love to bring out the best in him.

2. “And he sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the multitude putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. And a poor widow came, and put in two copper coins, which make a penny” (Mark 12:41-44; Luke 21:14). Let’s stop and interview this woman.

“Lady, why did you give your last penny?”

“I wanted to give special honor to God to show appreciation for all He has done for me,” she replies.

“Were you commanded to give your last two coins — from a widow?”

“If I had such a demanding God as to require the last resources of a poor widow, frankly, I might not have had the desire to give them to Him at all.” Love’s offering is spontaneous.

“Lady, didn’t you need that money?”

“Yes, and much more,” she continues. “But I feel that this was more meaningful than to honor Him out of abundance.” She did not check to see if she could afford to give. She was not smothered by caution.

“Come on now, do you expect me to believe this wasn’t done to attract attention?”

“I did not know you were watching, or cared. I hoped that God would see my love for Him. It was to attract His attention!”

“But, lady, the law requires only a tithe. Why should you give more?”

“I might give to fulfill the law while showing no love. I wanted to express the deep feelings of love that I have for God.”

And Jesus called His disciples to Him and said to them, “Truly, I say to you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For they all contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, her whole living.”

Mary’s response was one of emotional, extravagant beauty. The widow’s response was selflessness. Love carries us out into the sea of boundless expression.

3. Jesus was invited to a meal at Simon’s house (Luke 7:36-50). While He was eating, a sinful woman came in with an alabaster flask of ointment. “Standing behind him at his feet, weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears, and wiped them with the hair of her head, and kissed his feet, and anointed them with ointment.” Seeing this, Simon said to himself, “If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what sort of woman this is who is touching him, for she is a sinner.”

We need not interview this woman. Jesus interviewed Simon and explained her motives in contrast to his. Jesus said, “Simon, I have something to say to you.” He told of two debtors, one owing ten times as much as the other. When neither could pay, the creditor canceled both debts. “Now which of them will love him more?” Jesus asked. Simon knew the right answer. “The one, I suppose, to whom he forgave more,” he answered reluctantly.

“You have judged rightly,” Jesus said. Then turning toward the woman He said to Simon, “Do you see this woman? I entered your house, you gave me no water for my feet, but she has wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not ceased to kiss my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much; but he who is forgiven little, loves little.”

We can imagine the protesting thoughts that might have jumped into Simon's mind. "Jesus, you did not tell me you wanted your feet washed. You did not command me to kiss you. The law does not require that I anoint your head. You know that I would have done these things. ..."
That is the way I might have reasoned.

What was Simon's problem? Being a good Pharisee, he thought himself to have few, if any, sins. He needed little forgiveness, he thought. With such little cause for penitence, there would be no tears of sorrow nor of gratitude for mercy received. There would be little motivation for loving generosity. He would do his designated duties, but he had nothing overflowing from his heart. No loving fragrance flowed from within him to fill the house. He only distracted from those whose emptied flasks filled the dismal room with heavenly perfume.

Did these three women illustrate the response to law or to grace? If these women had been seeking to keep requirements under threat of hell, Mary's perfume would have lost its fragrance, the widow's offering would have only been an effort to appease a demanding God, and the sinful woman would have had no tears with which to wet His feet. None of their actions resulted from a guilt-prodding sermon. Their actions were as songs of praise divinely motivated. "Scared birds don't sing."

Our loving service is in response to grace. "If you love me, you will keep my commandments," but "We love because he first loved us." God's extravagant love is our motivation.

(Cecil Hook; Chapter 16 of *Free in Christ* published in 1984.)