

God's Loving Initiative; Our Devoted Response

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[0 : 0 0] Thanks very much, Angus. I just noticed we were wearing matching blue jumpers, but that was not an intentional wardrobe decision. I'd ever make those.

Let me begin as we look at this passage with a question. I'll give you a couple of seconds just to kind of mull this over in your head. It's actually two questions. Number one, what are you devoted to?

What is the thing in your life that you would give everything for? Is there anything that fits into that category? What are you devoted to? And then question two, what is the motivation for that devotion?

What is the reasoning behind that? What are you devoted to? What is your motivation for that? I said you'd have a couple of seconds. That's time up now.

Don't worry. We're not going to check your answers or anything. But I hope those questions are able to start getting us into the right mindset this morning for these verses that we are looking at together.

[1 : 0 2] I'm going to let the kind of fairly unsurprising cat out of the bag right at the beginning here and say this morning that the Bible calls us to be devoted to Jesus. The Bible calls us to be devoted to Jesus above everything else.

You won't be surprised at hearing me say that. That's not going to be a huge shock to hear that the Bible says that, that we're called to be devoted to Jesus. And yet also in this passage, I want us to see that the motivation for that devotion as well.

Because it's only actually as we grasp that motivation that we can really grasp this message. It's only then that we can really take to heart and we can really put into practice this devotion to Jesus that we're called to.

And that's what we see then in these verses, the motivation and then a model of that devotion. Before we dig into that, let me share with you an idea that I read recently.

This was from an Australian author called Christopher Watkin. And he speaks about how, as we observe the world, the world that we live in, everywhere around us operates in what he calls, he's a kind of brainy person, so he calls it an N-shaped dynamic.

[2 : 1 6] Basically, if you picture a kind of a lowercase N, his kind of illustration, his argument is that our devotion, our efforts are the things that come first.

That's the kind of the left leg, the upward stroke of the N. And if we get that right, if we get that kind of high enough, well then the benefits, the blessings, the rewards of that come down the other side.

That's the kind of the downward right-hand stroke of the N. So you see that in work things, don't you? We need to put in this effort. You work hard. You have to do what you have to do. That's the kind of the input.

And then after that, well then perhaps you'll get the recognition, the promotion, the pay rise, whatever it is that comes down the other side. You've perhaps seen that in or felt that in relationships before.

Well, if I do this for this person, if I help them in this way, if I have them over for dinner, well then surely I'm owed a favor. You know, they'll invite me back. I'll get something good out of it in return.

[3 : 13] And you absolutely see this N-shape attitude in a lot of religions and religious attitudes. You know, we perform this way. We do our bit, whether morally or ritually, whatever it is, we put in this upward effort.

And then the idea is that if we do what is right, if we do enough, well then God will give us the good stuff. You know, I've said my prayers this morning. God will provide for me a pretty smooth day.

Things will go the way I want them. Watkins puts this N-shaped dynamic like this. He says, we scratch God's back and God obligingly scratches ours.

But he goes on to point out how actually the incredible thing about the Bible is that it turns this N-shape upside down. It turns it on its head into a U-shape.

Actually, the way God relates to us is not that our performance leads to his reward. It's the opposite. It's that God's blessing comes down first.

[4 : 13] And it is that that leads to our grateful response. Again, if it's helpful, you can kind of picture that, that lowercase U or capital U as well, I suppose. God's loving initiative towards us that leads to our loving devotion back up toward him.

And I wanted to share that as we start because it's so fundamental to the message of the Bible, isn't it? That God loves us first. Also because it was a different way of picturing it that I hadn't heard before.

This kind of U-shape rather than an N-shape. But specifically, most specifically, because it gives us a great model of how to approach our passage and these verses this morning.

We see this U-shape in action in these verses here in John's Gospel. And so our plan this morning is to look at the kind of the two halves of that.

The down and then the up again. First, God's loving initiative. And as we said, it's only really having grasped that, only really having let that go deep, having really taken that to heart, that we can then consider our devoted response and the devoted response we see models in this passage.

[5 : 23] So that's the plan. Let's dig in and kind of follow that U-shape through the passage. First up, God's loving initiative. And the question, I suppose, is where do we see that in this passage?

Where is God's loving initiative? Really, we could say in some ways that we've already seen that in all that has happened in chapter 11 so far.

If you've not been with us the last couple of weeks, we began chapter 11 reading that incredible account of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead. And everything that happens in these verses, everything that happens in this section, chapter 11 and 12, everything that happens there is in response to what Jesus has first done.

Why is this dinner given for Jesus with Lazarus and Mary and Martha and plenty of others there? It is because he has first given life to Lazarus. So we see Jesus' initiative in just the kind of general context of this part of the Bible that we're in.

But also, also in our verses this morning, we see that work of Jesus emphasised or enlarged, even we might say, connected into the big picture of the Bible.

[6 : 36] Because as the scene is set for this meal, John really puts this emphasis on the Passover. Now the first verse that Angus read, verse 55 of chapter 11, Now the Passover of the Jews was at hand, and many went up from the country to Jerusalem to purify themselves.

God gives, sorry, John gives this specific time marker. It's Passover time, and that word Passover is repeated a couple more times. You'll see it in this passage. And John is not just giving that as a date, like we might say it was kind of an April time.

Actually, what is happening here is that John wants us to see all that's going on through the lens of the Passover, we might say. And actually, through the second half of John's Gospel, the feast of the Passover on the one hand, and what is happening to Jesus, his death, his crucifixion, the cross on the other hand, they are kind of held in parallel, that one explains the other.

So to make sense of this, then we need to get to grips with that. What was the Passover? The Passover was really the kind of the biggest celebration in the Jewish religious calendar.

It was kind of like Christmas and Easter all rolled into one. They obviously didn't have Christmas or Easter yet. But, you know, this huge kind of celebration. And actually, it was a celebration that looked all the way back to the events of the book of Exodus.

[8 : 05] Exodus is the second book in the Bible. And the events there where God had acted to save, God had acted to rescue his people from slavery in Egypt.

Right back then, at that time, on the specific night that God was going to free his people, and they would go from there, they would leave Egypt, they would cross over through the Red Sea, these kind of famous stories that we know.

On that specific night when God was going to act, he gave instruction for each family to take a lamb, to kill it, to prepare it, and to eat it together.

And in each household, the blood of that lamb, as it was being prepared, was to be put over the doorframe, over the doorposts of that house.

And then God said the reason for this was that when he came to judge the people's enemies, when God came to fight against the people of Egypt, who had enslaved them, God would pass over the houses of his people, would pass over the houses with the blood on the doorposts.

[9 : 15] And because of that, they would go free. And that is exactly what happened. That's exactly what we read in the book of Exodus. And right there in that book, in fact, the day before this event even took place, the people were given these instructions on how year after year after year after year, they were to repeat, they were to rehearse that particular meal that they ate as a reminder of what God had done for them that night.

As a reminder that because the lamb died, because of the blood of the lamb on the doorframe, God passed over them and so they could go free.

And so John, as he writes this gospel, John, who already right back in chapter one of the gospel, introduced Jesus twice as the lamb of God.

John wants us to have this Passover celebration of freedom through the death of the lamb in mind as the focus of his gospel turns to the death of Jesus.

And actually we see that here in Jesus himself in verses seven and eight, that he connects this whole incident to his death. Jesus said, leave her alone that she may keep it for the day of my burial.

[10 : 33] As the Passover is brought into focus, he's on the horizon. We hear Jesus here speak openly about his death for the first time in John's gospel.

So what is God's loving initiative that is the first move in this passage and in the gospel as a whole? It is that Jesus, the lamb of God, has come as the true fulfillment of the Passover, the true Passover lamb.

That through his death, those who trust in him, those who shelter under his blood, they are able to be free from his judgment and they are able to go free.

It's what we saw pictured two weeks ago. Jesus brings Lazarus out of the tomb only because he himself will go into the tomb. It's what we saw last week where it was said that Jesus will die in the place of, Jesus will die as a substitute for his people.

That's what we see in the rest of John's gospel. Jesus on the cross, his blood shed so that his people might go free. Jesus is the true Passover lamb.

[11 : 43] This is one of those incredible passages in the Bible where we see in some ways so clearly how the whole Bible fits together. And as we've said time and time again, how it is all pointing us to Jesus.

And actually the whole of the Bible is this record of God's initiating love toward those like us, like all of us who have gone astray, who have gone away from him. God's initiating love in order to bring his people home.

And that it finds its fulfillment in Jesus. And really the point is this, it's not that Jesus was a bit like the Passover lamb. You know, sometimes at church you might use an illustration or you might say, well, Jesus is a little bit like this thing that you know, and I'll get home and Julie will say, it's nothing like that.

That was a very tenuous link. Or, you know, we might use that as to say, you know, this quote might help us explain this thing better. Or even this morning, you know, we talk about that U-shape. You know, God blesses and we respond.

It's a picture to convey an idea. That can be really helpful. But that is not what is happening here. John is not kind of looking around and thinking, oh, what is Jesus like?

[12 : 53] What is the cross like? How could I explain this? Well, I suppose it's a little bit like the Passover, isn't it? I'll use that. No, actually, it's the other way around. That actually God gave the Passover to point to Jesus.

Jesus isn't a bit like the Passover lamb. The Passover lamb is a model of Jesus, given to help God's people see their need of a saviour, their need of Jesus, and to put their trust in him.

Jesus is the true Passover lamb. And the reason that's important is that it shows us, as we've said, that the whole of the Bible is a record of God's initiating love toward us.

And that that love finds its fulfillment, its climax in Jesus. That Jesus came in order to die so that people like us, if our trust is in him, can have life.

That is why John records the questions people are asking. Verse 56, they were looking for Jesus and saying to one another, as they stood in the temple, what do you think? That he will not come to the feast at all?

[13 : 57] You know, the people are all wondering, is Jesus going to turn up? They know, and he knows, the danger of him coming. Really, the point is, and again, the kind of the irony we see here, not just that Jesus will turn up to the Passover feast at great risk, cost to himself, and that actually he will turn up as the Passover lamb as he goes to the cross, giving everything that his people might go free.

If you're not a Christian this morning, or if you're not really sure, if you're still thinking things over, asking questions, as always, we are so glad you're here. And it's so important to ask those questions.

I'd say that there's no more important question to ask. There's no better place to be than in a church to ask those questions. But the number one thing to hear, the number one thing to take away and to take to heart, is that Christianity is all about what God has done.

It is all about his loving initiative fulfilled in Jesus. It's trusting in what he has done and not what we do. It's not about us finding God as if God was somehow kind of hiding there, trying to get away from us.

It's about a God who has found us, who has pursued us, who's taken that loving, loving initiative and who longs to welcome us home to him.

[15 : 19] It's so important we hear that. It's not this kind of end shape where we put in the effort, we clean up our act, we do some religious things and God responds by showing us some love. No, it is God's loving initiative which is shown through Jesus.

And we are responding to what he has first done because he has done the most incredible thing for us. And also for those that I say this morning who are Christians, again, it's so important that we remember that.

That we don't kind of slip from this U shape back into this end shape where we think, well, actually, we're pretty good. We're doing all this good stuff. Actually, if we want to live as committed Christians, if we want to be people who would truly say our faith is active, our faith shapes our lives, that we would be truly devoted to Jesus.

If we want to be people who can truly say we are committing our lives to that which is of eternal significance, the question, first and foremost, that we need to ask is not ultimately what do we need to do, but rather how can we keep on remembering what Jesus has done.

That is the power. That is the motivation. If our question is always what do I need to do next, we'll exhaust ourselves, we'll get bitter, we'll just run out of steam. If the question is how can I remember more?

[16 : 41] How can I dwell on more? How can I appreciate more what God has done through Jesus? Well, that will move us to give everything in response to him.

I think that is why a church is central in the life of a Christian because we are so prone to forget. Our attention is constantly drawn in different directions, left on our own.

We can take even the most incredible thing for granted and God knows that. And so he gives us the church and it's as we prioritise week by week coming together, not so much to kind of learn new things and not so much to hear something groundbreaking that we've never considered before, but actually rather to be reminded of and encourage one another in the oldest thing of the gospel, God's undeserved love for us.

That is why we gather as a church to encourage one another in that and to be spurred on by that. Always remembering that the whole of our faith is based on what God has done for us.

Christ, the Passover lamb who dies in our place and is the foundation for everything else. And so that's the first, the kind of, the downward stroke, I suppose, of the you, God's loving initiative.

[17 : 57] I do wish, you know, there were some kind of clever words I could say, I suppose, that would really bring that home, really make that go deep, really make that connect emotionally. I don't know if I'm, I'm able to do that.

But actually our prayer is as we gather as his people that God through his Holy Spirit would impress on us more and more and more the all-surpassing worth of what he has first done for us in Christ Jesus.

That we love because he first loved us. And so there's the foundation for this passage. We see everything that is happening in light of the Passover and Jesus as the true Passover lamb.

The whole of the gospel of the Bible is God's loving initiative. Just one final thing before we kind of move on from that. It's a great encouragement to us. It means we can never fall out of God's love.

God doesn't love us because we've done this, this and this and if we actually we stop doing that, God's love will be taken away. The Bible emphasizes that God loved us first even when we were far from him.

[19 : 00] And so we can be confident that that love will never stop. That nothing that we do will ever cause him to take that love away. We love because he first loved us.

But also then what we see in this passage is a focus on moving on from that and an example of a right response to what God has done. We see that in Mary's devotion to Jesus.

Jesus. The gospel is all about what God has done but if we really grasp that that does then change. That does then motivate. That does then revolutionize what we do.

So let's talk about that secondly. A devoted response. It's seen there in chapter 12. People are reclining it says at the table for this meal just to kind of get that in your minds rather than sort of sitting around a table like we might picture.

They would have been this table at the center a low table the people kind of lying down with their feet out behind them and with that in mind we read verse 3 Mary therefore and that therefore is very important.

[20 : 03] It's a reminder that this is a response to Jesus. We're still operating out of this U-shaped model. Mary therefore took a pound of expensive ointment made from pure nard and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped his feet with her hair.

The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. It is this incredible model for us this incredible demonstration of devotion to Jesus.

This is an act of giving everything before him you know the action itself what could be more humbling than anointing someone's feet than wiping them with your hair that's not going to beat around the bush here or be overly pious that would be embarrassing and that was not a normal thing to do.

Mary puts herself and her standing kind of to one side in order to demonstrate her utter devotion to her Lord in her actions and also the devotion there is seen simply in the expense of it.

We read on verse 5 that this ointment this nard this type of perfume it said it would have been worth around 300 denarii so one denarius was like a day's labourer's wage so you can do the maths this perfume is almost a year's salary you can imagine like the boots points you would get on this stuff it's incredibly valuable what's the equivalent to that it's hard to kind of to think of it isn't it we don't have many things valued that highly around our home I suppose if you had a particularly nice car it is almost the equivalent it's just kind of handing over the keys it's done it's gone someone else is now this is a huge cost a huge sacrifice for Mary this is perhaps a family heirloom that has been passed down this is probably the single most valuable possession she owns and actually uses it to anoint the feet of Jesus this devoted response giving everything to Jesus and holding nothing back

[22 : 13] I wonder what our response would have been we see Judas' response why wasn't it sold for the poor he says although actually he has his own greedy motivation for that that we read on he liked to kind of cream a little bit off the top of the money pouch that he was responsible for it's very easy for us to criticise his response to Mary how could Judas have been so hard hearted but actually how do we respond when people show incredible devotion to Jesus you know are we tempted to think that's a little bit over the top isn't it that's a bit dramatic that's a little bit too much but that is not Jesus' response is it verse 7 Jesus said leave her alone so that she may keep it for the day of my burial for the poor you always have with you but you do not always have me again Jesus brings the focus to his death to his burial and saying that seen in light of that seen through these kind of Passover lenses that we've been speaking about of God's loving initiative that actually this costly and complete devotion is exactly the right response again this passage is here as a model an example for us to respond like

Mary rather than Judas and so really I suppose that gives us the question doesn't it well what does that look like there's the kind of million dollar question what does it mean to respond like Mary what is the equivalent action for today and I got to this point kind of planning for this morning and just kind of ground to a halt a little bit here because it would be great to be able to stand up and say well here are the specific things that everyone will get out a kind of a pen and a notebook you know here they are it's very black and white it means A B and C go and do that this week and we kind of tick this box and yet the truth is it's not as simple as that in a similar way I think if someone had asked Jesus ten minutes before this meal what does devotion to you look like well he wouldn't have said well it means you have to put perfume on my feet and wipe it with your hair you know everyone has to do that and yet as Mary carries out this action it is recognised as that devotion that attitude that love being put into practice rather than specific things to go and do the question is do our actions does our life display the same attitude of devotion toward Jesus in very real and tangible ways as Mary did are we living out a love for Jesus in ways which like it was for

Mary might seem perhaps a bit weird to those around us might make other people feel uncomfortable might be a bit embarrassing or seen as a bit full on it might be really costly and yet are actually entirely appropriate given all that Jesus has done for us perhaps it's to be the people who speak about Jesus in their everyday conversations because we think he's incredible and it's the reason for the hope that we have a very simple way of an outworking of our devotion to him whether it's to be the family who gather around the Bible and prayer even though it's easier just to get the kids to bed but actually we recognise how great Jesus is and we want him to be the centre of our home and of our family whether it's to be the people who say actually we can't make that event or that appointment that Sunday morning because we'll be at church that's what we do because we need to be reminded and built up in what he has done and to build others up as well all these and there could be countless of us they might sound strange they might sound unusual they might sound costly but are just small demonstrations of our devotion to Jesus and actually they don't really come close today when we think of what Mary paid when we think of the kind equivalent value of what Mary does in this story perhaps we should be thinking of much bigger things but I think really that the key is that attitude of devotion to

Jesus do our actions really reveal that attitude like Mary's or when we picture the scene if we're really honest with ourselves are we more standing in the place of Judas somewhat kind of cruel and detached looking on with a degree of indifference perhaps even disdain we might say because actually we've got our own agenda to think about we've got our own priorities that we hold we've got our own desires that we want to be satisfied Judas is the person in this scene doing the same as everyone else Judas is even the person who sounds kind of sensible perhaps compassionate even but what about the poor he says and the bible does tell us a lot about how we should care for the poor but actually it is Mary who has truly grasped the depths of God's initiating love and responds appropriately with true devotion to Jesus and then as this passage finishes we see again this kind of contrast in the responses to Jesus and amplified even more the last couple of verses even more people come and trust in

Jesus it says they came to see him but also to see Lazarus who he had raised from the dead again they respond with belief because of what Jesus has first done and yet the religious leaders rather than give their devotion to Jesus decide that actually because of this Lazarus has to die as well they make plans to kill him so that they can keep hold of that power and position and authority that we spoke about last week they are completely devoted to themselves at the cost of anyone else they have no understanding or appreciation of what Jesus has done and so no love for him and so it is no wonder that these are the guys that Judas will end up siding with and betraying Jesus to those who put themselves first as we said earlier our prayer is that we would truly grasp what God has done for us in Jesus and that we would respond with that devoted response giving everything to him holding nothing back that we would have that aptitude of those who come and believe because of what Jesus has done and having believed would give our whole lives to him and that from his loving initiative would flow our loving and devoted response in every area of our life let's pray together please sólo let's bow on the floor of it peace of it him