

# “Selected Gospel Sections”

Spring Series 1

Lesson 10

“The Woman with the Ointment”

Matthew 26:6-13; Mark 14:3-9; Luke 7:36-50; John 12:1-8.

**Objective:** To understand the message of the Gospel accounts in their context within each work independently and then to compare the accounts to each other to seek understanding of emphasis and focus. The goal is then to apply this message to our time and context in order to understand the message’s call on our lives.

**Materials:** To use the Greek, Syriac, and other ancient translations in order to help us understand the message of these Gospels. We will also examine the writings about these passages in journal articles, commentaries and other sources.

## Procedures

1. To first translate each text from Greek and then compare it to other ancient translations.
2. To identify issues of importance within the texts and to explore possible meanings as they applied to the original audience.
3. To take the meaning for the original audience of the Gospels and to understand it how applies to our modern context and cultural situation.
4. To explore ways that these text call the disciples of Jesus to live their lives as faithful followers.

**Matthew 26:6-13** <sup>6</sup> Now when Jesus was in Bethany in the house of Simon the scabby one, <sup>7</sup> a woman came to Him having an alabaster jar of very costly ointment and she poured it upon His head as He was sitting at the table. <sup>8</sup> But after the disciples saw it they were angry saying, “Why this waste? <sup>9</sup> For this could have been sold for much money and the money given to the poor.” <sup>10</sup> But Jesus, after becoming aware of this said to them, “Why do you cause trouble for the woman? For she has performed a good deed unto me. <sup>11</sup> For always you have the poor with you, but me you will not always have. <sup>12</sup> For after pouring this ointment upon my body she has prepared me for burial. <sup>13</sup> Truly I say to you, wherever the good

**Mark 14:3-9** <sup>3</sup> And while He was in Bethany in the house of Simon the scabby one, reclining, a woman came to Him having an alabaster jar of very expensive ointment of oil of pure nard, she broke the alabaster jar and poured it upon His head. <sup>4</sup> But some there were angry, and to one another they said, “Why was this ointment wasted? <sup>5</sup> For this ointment could have been sold for more than three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor.” And they rebuked her. <sup>6</sup> But Jesus said, “Forgive her, why do you trouble her? She has performed a good deed for me. <sup>7</sup> For you always have the poor with you and whenever you wish you will be able to do good, but, you will not always have me. <sup>8</sup> She has done what she could; she

**Luke 7:36-50** <sup>36</sup> Now one of the Pharisees asked asked Him to eat with him, and He entered into the house of the Pharisee and took His place. <sup>37</sup> And behold a woman in the city who was a sinner, also having learned that He was in the house of the Pharisee brought an alabaster jar of ointment. <sup>38</sup> And she stood behind Him, by His feet, weeping and she began to bathe His feet with her tears and with the hair of her head was wiping and kissing His feet and anointing them with the ointment. <sup>39</sup> And after the Pharisee who had invited Him saw it he said to himself, “If this one was a prophet, He would know what sort of woman this is who is touching Him, that she is a sinner. <sup>40</sup> And Jesus replied and said to him,

**John 12:1-8** <sup>1</sup> Six days before Passover Jesus came into Bethany, where Lazarus was, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. <sup>2</sup> They gave to Him a dinner, and Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those reclining at the table with Him. <sup>3</sup> Then Mariam taking a litra of costly pure Nard ointment, and she anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped His feet with her hair: and the house was filled with the smell of the ointment. <sup>4</sup> But Judas the Iscariot, one of His disciples, the one about to betray Him, said, <sup>5</sup> “Why was this ointment not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor.” <sup>6</sup> Now he said this, not because he cared for the poor, but because he was a thief

news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her.”

anointed my body beforehand, for its burial. <sup>9</sup> Truly I say to you, wherever the good news is proclaimed unto the whole world what she has done, it will be told in remembrance of her.

“Simon, I have something to say to you.” He said, “Say it Teacher.” <sup>41</sup> Two debtors there were to a certain moneylender; one owed five hundred denarii, but the other fifty. <sup>42</sup> They did not have the means to pay, he cancelled both debts. Now which of them will love him more? <sup>43</sup> Simon answered and said, “I suppose that the one from whom the greater debt he cancelled.” And He said to him, “You judge rightly.” <sup>44</sup> And turning to the woman, He said to Simon, “Do you see this woman? I entered your house, you gave no water for my feet, but she bathed my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. <sup>45</sup> You gave me no kiss, but she, from the time she entered, has not stopped kissing my feet. <sup>46</sup> You

and was keeper of the money box and was stealing what was put in it. <sup>7</sup> Therefore Jesus said, “Forgive her, because she has kept it for the day of my burial. <sup>8</sup> For the poor you have always with you, but me you will not always have.”

**did not anoint my head  
with oil, but she anointed  
my feet with ointment. <sup>47</sup>  
Therefore, I say to you, her  
sins have been forgiven,  
which were many, because  
she loved much. But the  
one whom little is  
forgiven, loves little.” <sup>48</sup>  
Then He said to her, “Your  
sins have been forgiven.”  
<sup>49</sup> And those reclining at  
the table began to say in  
themselves, “Who is this  
who forgives sins?” <sup>50</sup> And  
He said to the woman,  
“Your trust has saved you,  
go into peace.”**

As we come to these accounts of the anointing of Jesus, as one might expect there is a great deal of controversy regarding the relationship between these four accounts. There have been tremendous efforts made to explain the similarity and the differences between these accounts. It has been supposed by some that there was one incident behind all four of these accounts that has been interpreted and used in different ways by the various Gospel writers. Coakley strongly rejects this view as do a number of others. Instead he proposes that there is more than one incident that is being reported by the Gospel writers.<sup>1</sup> It seems quite obvious that there are two different incidents, one that is recorded in Matthew, Mark and John and a different one, an earlier incident, recorded by Luke. The one in Luke occurs as part of the Galilean ministry of Jesus and is much earlier than the other one. As I looked at the many articles written about these accounts I have been deeply disappointed and frustrated that the primary focus appears to undertake a search for the mythical figure described as the “historical Jesus” by Bultmann and many others that are in fact quite critical of the biblical stories in the form that we have them now. I am sure there might be a time

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<sup>1</sup> J. F. Coakley, “The Anointing at Bethany and the Priority of John,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* (1988) 107:2, pp. 241-256. George R. Beasley-Murray, *John*, in the Word Biblical Commentary series, Vol. 36 (Waco, TX: Word Books, Publisher, 1987), p. 206. I. Howard Marshall, *Commentary on Luke*, in the New International Greek Testament Commentary (Exeter UK.: The Paternoster Press, 1978), pp. 304-314.

and a place for this skepticism, but I think a more productive use of our time will be spent exploring the message that was intended to be conveyed by these accounts by the Gospel writers.

Coakley argues that the most ancient record of this account is to be found in the Gospel of John,<sup>2</sup> whether it is or not, frankly I do not care, but I am going to begin with it because I want to do so and because it is the longest of the three recording the same incident. John records Jesus as entering Bethany six days before the Passover setting the time of this incident more specifically in the context of the ministry of Jesus. One might assume that the scene is at the house of Lazarus, but this is not what the text actually says, it says that Jesus came to Bethany where Lazarus “was” (ἦν - en). From this the NRSV and the CEB extrapolate that the location of the meal is in the home of Lazarus (this is an interpretation not a translation); while the NET Bible simply sees this as indicating that the location of the meal is in Bethany where Lazarus lived. We are introduced once again to Lazarus, whom Jesus had raised from the dead and it is important that we note the context surrounding this account: in 11:57<sup>3</sup> we are told that the chief priests and the Pharisees had given

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<sup>2</sup> J. F. Coakley, “The Anointing at Bethany and the Priority of John,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* (1988) 107:2, pp. 241-256.

<sup>3</sup> **(Now the chief priests and the Pharisees had given orders that anyone who knew where Jesus was should report it, so that they could arrest him.)**. NET.

orders to have Jesus arrested. At 12:10-11<sup>4</sup> we learn that their plot included more than just plans to arrest Jesus, but they also planned to kill Him, because many Jews were following Him rather than them.

Following this, there would be the triumphal entry fulfilling a prophecy from Zechariah 9:9.<sup>5</sup> All of this context, and especially the account of the anointing of Jesus by Mariam (not Mary as in your English Bibles), will act as an extremely stark contrast of faith as opposed to the faithlessness of Judas, Caiaphas, and the Pharisees.<sup>6</sup> Her trust will demonstrate the stark contrast between the light and the darkness, between trust and lack of trust and between arrogance and humility. Certainly Judas will have had numerous opportunities to hear Jesus speak, to see Him perform miraculous signs, and the seeds were indeed planted for him to trust Jesus, to believe. He will have either witnessed the raising of Lazarus from the dead, or at the very least been fully aware of this. By contrast, Mary will have had less exposure to Jesus and yet her actions reflects an intense trust and perhaps even a deeper understanding of the words of Jesus than is found among the

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<sup>4</sup> **10 So the chief priests planned to put Lazarus to death as well,** <sup>11</sup> since it was on account of him that many of the Jews were deserting and were believing in Jesus. NRSV.

<sup>5</sup> **Rejoice greatly, daughter of Zion! Shout, daughter of Jerusalem! Look! Your king is coming to you: He is legitimate and victorious, humble and riding on a donkey — on a young donkey, the foal of a female donkey.** NET.

<sup>6</sup> George R. Beasley-Murray, *John*, p. 208-209.

twelve. If indeed she was aware that Jesus is about to die, then her act anticipates that in way that is not found among the twelve, certainly not in Judas, the Pharisees, or Caiaphas, the High Priest.

At John 20:30 we are given the purpose statement for John writing His Gospel and for this account of the anointing of Jesus.<sup>7</sup> The purpose for John writing his account was so that people might come to “believe” to “trust” (πιστεύ[σ]ητε - *pisteuseite*) that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God and that through this belief they might have life in His Name. The calling of this episode is a reflection of this calling. Mariam is an example of one who “trusts” Jesus in humble faith. This faith stands in contrast to the scheming and mistrust exhibited by Judas, by the Pharisees and by Caiaphas who stands as the religious leader of the Jewish people. There is the contrast of deceit, scheming, selfishness, fear and arrogance to be found in these people as opposed to this woman who humbles herself in a tender act of devotion and trust. The contrast could not be more stark. Caiaphas stood in the long line of priests who gained their position through bribery and because of the consent of foreign powers, who are idolatrous, faithless Gentiles. The collaboration with evil of these figures stood in contrast to the humble trust of Mariam. Their motives are plainly set out, and they seek to

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<sup>7</sup> Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. <sup>31</sup> But these are written so **that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.** NRSV.

serve themselves and they act out of fear of losing what they have rather than in trust and humility. By contrast, Mariam cares nothing for appearances, for protocol, for propriety, nor does she act out of fear, but she acts out of love, devotion, trust and humility.

One of the things that critics of this account often cite as evidence to discount its veracity is that the washing of feet and anointing with oil just was not something that was done in the ancient world. The fact is that there are a number of accounts that in some sense provide parallels to what is found in the Gospels:

- (1) Homer, *Odyssey* 19.503-7: “The old woman went forth through the hall to bring water for the feet, for all the first was spilled. And when she had washed him, and anointed him richly with oil, Odysseus again drew his chair nearer to the fire....<sup>8</sup>
- (2) Aristophanes, *Wasps* 606-9: “When I get home with my pay — ho, ho! they’re all over me. Because of the money, you see. First my daughter comes to give me a wash and rub (ἀλείφω - *aleipho* this is the same word that is used of Mariam’s anointing of the feet of Jesus) my feet with oil, and it’s dear papa this and dear papa that and she leans over to give me a kiss — and fish out those three obols with her tongue!<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> English translation by A. T. Murray (Loeb Classical Library; vol 2, 1960), p. 265.

<sup>9</sup> English translation by D. Barrett (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964), p. 59.

- (3) Athenaeus, *Deipnosophists* 12.553: “There was the custom at Athens, among persons who lived in luxury, of anointing even the feet with perfume.” There are other accounts similar to this one too in this work.<sup>10</sup>
- (4) Pliny, *Natural History* 13.22: “We have seen people put scent on the soles of their feet, a practice said to have been taught to the emperor Nero by Marcus Otho; pray, how could it be noticed or give any pleasure from that part of the body?”<sup>11</sup>
- (5) Petronius, *Satyricon* 70: “I am ashamed to tell you what followed: in defiance of all convention, some long-haired boys brought ointment in a silver basin, and anointed our feet as we lay, after winding little garlands round our feet and ankles.”<sup>12</sup>
- (6) Curtius, *History of Alexander* 8.9.27: Describing the magnificent customs of the kings of India: “When his sandals are taken off, his feet are bathed in perfumes.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> English translation by C. B. Gulick (Loeb Classical Library; vol. 5, 1963), p. 513.

<sup>11</sup> English translation by H. Rackham (Loeb Classical Library; vol. 4, 1960), p. 111.

<sup>12</sup> English translation by M. Heseltine (Loeb Classical Library; 1961), p. 135.

<sup>13</sup> English translation by J. C. Rolfe (Loeb Classical Library; vol. 2, 1962), p. 309.

(7) Tosefta, *Shabbat* 3:16B-E: On the Sabbath, “One should not put oil on his foot while it is in the shoe. And one should not put oil on his foot while it is in the sandal. But one may put oil on his foot and then put it into the shoe. He puts oil on his foot and puts it into the sandal.”<sup>14</sup>

(8) *Sipre* on Deuteronomy 33:24: A man agrees to supply a whole city with oil, but he does not at first give the agent the impression of being a merchant on such a scale. However: “As soon as he reached his house, he called to his maidservant and said to her, ‘Come and wash our feet.’ She filled a bowl with oil and washed their feet, to fulfill what is written, ‘And he shall dip his foot in oil.’”<sup>15</sup> After dinner he dispenses the required amount of oil and more.<sup>16</sup>

It should be obvious that these instances do not in any way indicate that the anointing of the feet, such as is found in the Gospel accounts, is an everyday occurrence in Jesus day, in Palestine. These accounts point out quite the contrary, that such a lavish expression was indeed a rare and extravagant gesture, but not one that was completely unprecedented.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, such a practice stands in contrast to the all that

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<sup>14</sup> Jacob Neusner, trans. *The Tosefta*, Vol I (Peabody MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2002), p. 369

<sup>15</sup> L. Finkelstein, editor, *Siphre zu Deuteronomium* (Breslau: Stefan Münz, 1939) p. 421.

<sup>16</sup> J. F. Coakley, “The Anointing at Bethany and the Priority of John,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* (1988) 107:2, pp. 241-256.

<sup>17</sup> J. F. Coakley, “The Anointing at Bethany and the Priority of John,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* (1988) 107:2, pp. 241-256.

was ordinary and to that which not at all extraordinary, which was the dubious actions of the other three actors in this drama, in John's Gospel. There was nothing unique or rare about the fact that Judas would betray Jesus. There was nothing rare about the plotting and fear expressed by the Pharisees. There was nothing extraordinary about the plotting, corruption and injustice exhibited by Caiaphas. These actions were an ordinary and common part of life in first century Palestine as they are of our modern world. In this, the account of the Gospel writers represents something all too familiar and common to them in their day and to us in our modern era. Betrayal, injustice, corruption, mistrust were all too common in that era and still are far too common in ours. The call of the Gospel is for us to be different, to be like Mariam, humble, trusting of Jesus, adoring of Him, and faithful to Him and His teachings.

In the midst of this account by John there is also a calling to care for the poor as a perpetual mark of the people of God. Judas pretends to have concern for the poor all the while he is betraying Jesus for his own purposes. I have heard many try to make excuses for why Judas betrayed Jesus, but John offers no quarter describing him using the term "thief" (κλέπτης - *kleptes*) and the term "to steal" (βαστάζω - *bastadzo*). The contrast is stark and poignant. One follower chooses to bless the Lord with an extravagant and precious gift the other only seeks steal. John has already set out this contrast in John

10:10 when Jesus said, **“The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”**<sup>18</sup> Could there be any more apt description of those who had arrayed themselves against Jesus and would fulfill their schemes against Him in betrayal, lying, and ultimately in seeking his death (Judas, the Pharisees and Caiaphas).

Jesus rebukes those who rebuke Mariam (the disciples) for her act of extravagance in Matthew, while in Mark we are just told that it was some who were there, whereas the focus in John is upon the one person Judas. Matthew and Mark do add the prophecy that what was done by this blessed woman would be proclaimed wherever the Gospel was proclaimed. In the midst of John’s account there are ever in the air whispers of resurrection as we are reminded of the raising of Lazarus from the dead. This hope is wafted in the air and should inspire hope and wonder in the disciples when Jesus is crucified as they contemplate who He is and what He did while He was alive. It appears that this was brought to the forefront of their minds at the resurrection, as they remembered these events and as they now lived in the hope of the promises of Jesus, because then they would come to understand what was before them

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<sup>18</sup> NRSV.

all the time, but obscured by their fears, by their hardness of heart, and by their trust in the wrong people and the wrong things.

Luke's account is in a different setting altogether, being set in the Galilean ministry of Jesus, the early part of His ministry. Here we find Jesus the guest in the house of one of the Pharisees, one who is unnamed and anonymous, whose name has melted into the mists of times and fallen into obscurity. His acts and his attitude would be preserved as a warning to those of us who would follow. It would serve as a challenge of the attitude and the heart that we are not to have. People that are self-righteous, and believe they are good and not as bad as others, and therefore they allow their hope to rest in their goodness rather than in the goodness of Jesus. This woman, described as a "sinner" (*ἁμαρτωλός* - *hamartolos*) stands behind Jesus "weeping" and then she begins to bathe His feet in her tears, then she anoints them with ointment and wipes His feet with her hair. She is so moved by the presence of Jesus that she responds with an extravagant act of love and contrition.

By contrast the Pharisee had not even given what should have been common courtesy, a kiss of greeting, water for His feet, nor did he honor Jesus by anointing His head with oil. Once again we find a stark contrast being displayed by the Gospel writer (Luke). Jesus highlights this contrast by the telling of

a parable which contrasts one who has been forgiven for their small debt and someone forgiven with a large debt. These images stand for the two actors in our story, one, the Pharisee, who sees himself as righteous and therefore is represented by the one with the small debt. He sees no great need for forgiveness as he sees himself as better than those who have much greater debt, much greater sin. He expects much from God, but he expects to earn it through his own actions, through his righteousness, thus demonstrating his love for himself rather than his love for God.

The woman, by contrast is represented by the character that has a great debt and she knows this and does not expect to be able to repay this debt and yet in spite of it all she expresses “love” in the midst of her brokenness and humility. She seeks to honor the one she knows is truly righteous, the one who truly represents God. In her humility she expresses her love and the love of God is expressed in the words of Jesus as He forgives her sins. He does not forgive her because she is worthy, or because she has paid her debt: that could never happen and she knew that, and yet in her brokenness the heart of God poured out mercy in the form of forgiveness, as a gift of love. God loved both, but the love was rebuffed by the Pharisee through his attitude and his actions. At 7:50 we find Jesus giving the woman these words: **“Your trust has saved you, go into peace.”** These words are not just for this woman, they are for all

people and they issue the challenge, will we trust ourselves, or will we trust in Jesus? Simple words to say, but hard to live. We continually default back to trusting ourselves and not trusting in God. We are called to humble ourselves and to trust in Jesus, to recognize our great debt, and to trust His great love and to love Him much rather than little. This is the message of these four accounts as recorded by the Gospel writers. This is the calling that they still bring to us today.

# Synopsis

The focus of so many scholars is upon the story behind the accounts found in the Gospels. This can at times prove helpful, but it must never be at the expense of the message intended by the Gospel writers to challenge our hearts and our souls. In the Gospel accounts it is most likely that what we find in them represents two different instances of Jesus having His feet anointed by a woman. One is near the beginning of the ministry of Jesus while in Galilee (Luke), while the other is near the time of His crucifixion and burial (John, Matthew, and Mark). In both of these accounts there is a contrast made between other actors in the Gospel accounts.

John contrasts Mariam and her faith and humility against that of Judas, the Pharisees and Caiaphas. In the one instance we find Mariam humble, adoring, and trusting of Jesus. In the another instance we find Judas as distrustful, deceitful and as a betrayer of trust. With the Pharisees we see them claiming to be righteous and noble and yet in reality their actions and their plans betray the reality of their dark hearts. They scheme to kill another human being because of their fears and their desire to retain the status quo rather than to live into a better reality where they may not occupy such exalted positions. With Caiaphas the



high priest, he forgoes justice and instead pursues his own agenda of preserving his power and authority at the expense of an innocent man's life.

The calling of all these accounts is the calling to humility, trust in God, and the recognition of the truth of who and what we are, and how that differs from our true calling from God. We are called to rest in the love and grace of God and to trust Him for all those things that are in reality beyond our control. What we can control is who we will trust, and Jesus calls us to trust Him.

# Questions

1. Why do you think one person loves another person?
2. How are humility and love connected?
3. How does arrogance destroy relationship?
4. How does arrogance deceive and blind a person?
5. What are some ways that you see indications of darkness existing in our world today?
6. Why do you think a woman is cast as the hero of these accounts in the Gospels? What message are we to gain from this?
7. Why do you think a sinner has more humility than one who seeks to live a righteous life?
8. How would you describe humility?
9. How would you describe arrogance?
10. Why do you think people scheme and manipulate others?
11. How would a person recognize that they are manipulating others?
12. What safeguards us from manipulating others?
13. How do you know that you are forgiven?

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14. Why do you think Jesus seeks to honor the woman who anointed His feet by the proclamation of her deeds wherever the Gospel is proclaimed?
  15. What are some ways that you have seen the great love of one person expressed for another person?
  16. How would you judge whether a person is a prophet of God, or not, today (Luke 7:39)?
  17. What is the greatest lesson that you see being taught in these passages of Scripture?

# To Take Home

## **What is Important to know?**

It is important to know that no matter how we might compare ourselves with other human beings and think of ourselves as righteous, the reality is very different. We can never save ourselves by doing enough to earn our salvation. It is only through the mercy of God that we have hope. God loves us and pursues us, but our arrogance and fear blinds us to this reality. Only true humility can have any chance of allowing us to see the truth and to respond appropriately to God and to one another. What are some things that cause you to be afraid?

## **Where is God in these words?**

God is in these words teaching us the way of His heart and calling us to reflect His nature in ours; one of humility and tenderness. The world continually calls us away from trusting God and challenges us to trust in wealth, power, governments, and in that which is fleeting. God calls us to “trust” in Him. What are some ways that you live your life reflecting the calling of God?

## **What does any of this mean for how I live my life?**

God calls His children to reflect His nature and His priorities. This clashes with those that are set by the world and its priorities. Fear often drives us to do things and to pursue things that are based in our fears. So often these fears are perceived rather than real and our imaginations empower them so that they dominate our horizons and obscure the calling of our creator and our Lord. What are some things that you seek to do in order to keep your life grounded in God’s reality rather than living a life dominated by your fears?

## **What is the word of God calling us to do?**

The word of God is calling us to trust Him, to put aside our fears, to put aside our concerns, our schemes and our plans and to pursue His calling to be His image-bearer, His agent of love and forgiveness, a light in the darkness. The calling of God calls us to humble ourselves, shed our blindness in that humility and die for one another as He did for us, trusting in Him to raise us up as He did Jesus. How can you reflect the life of Jesus more fully in your own life tomorrow?