CORNERSTONE CONNECTIONS
SEPTEMBER 2025

the alabaster jar

Scripture Story: Matthew 26:6-13; Mark 14:3-11; Luke 7:36-50; John 11:55-57; 12:1-11.
Commentary: *The Desire of Ages* (or *Humble Hero*), chapter 62.
Key Text: Luke 7:37, 38.

PREPARING TO TEACH

I. SYNOPSIS

This lesson explores the story of Mary pouring costly perfume on the feet of Jesus amid condemning scowls from the Pharisees and cruel criticism from Judas. Nevertheless, Jesus forgave and defended this woman of ill repute by telling a parable of the grateful debtor. Next, Jesus forcefully reprimanded Simon for his insulting breach of etiquette.

As teacher, you have numerous options for emphasis in a classic story such as this one. Moreover, you can work from any one of the four Gospel accounts, or use a combination of texts to present the narrative.

There are many themes that emerge naturally from this story. First, you could look at the gender dynamics going on. A cursory study into the abuse of women in the ancient world underscores just how radical Jesus was when it came to His treatment of women. No rabbi had ever accepted women and included them in his inner circle like Jesus did.

Another direction you could take this study is to delve into the virtue of humility. The humility of Mary juxtaposed against the arrogance of the Pharisees makes for an interesting case study into a topic dear to God's heart. "I hate pride and arrogance,"[1] the Lord declares. A nuance on this topic could spotlight the humiliation that Mary surely felt at the hands of pious, holy men and how Jesus slammed their pompous "righteousness."

Perhaps the most obvious teaching from this story centers in the topic of gratitude. This is the emphasis of Ellen White in her treatment of the story. Thus, the teacher's helps in this lesson will also be weighted toward this theme.

Finally, you could opt for a more general thematic approach and simply focus on the gospel. The grace of Jesus and His lavish forgiveness upon a repentant sinner displays the heart of the gospel. Furthermore, the radical transformation of Mary gives clear evidence of the power of the gospel to change a person from the inside out.

II. TARGET

The students will:

- Hear a story that speaks to the grace of God and its power to transform a messed-up life. *(Know)*
- Sense the loving heart of God for sinners. *(Feel)*
- Receive an invitation to connect with Jesus in the same intimate, grateful manner as Mary did. *(Respond)*

III. EXPLORE

The Experience of Salvation, Seventh-day Adventist Fundamental Beliefs, no. 10: "In infinite love and mercy God made Christ, who knew no sin, to be sin for us, so that in Him we might be made the righteousness of God. Led by the Holy Spirit we sense our need, acknowledge our sinfulness, repent of our transgressions, and exercise faith in Jesus as Saviour and Lord, Substitute and Example.

This saving faith comes through the divine power of the Word and is the gift of God's grace. Through Christ we are justified, adopted as God's sons and daughters, and delivered from the lordship of sin. Through the Spirit we are born again and sanctified; the Spirit renews our minds, writes God's law of love in our hearts, and we are given the power to live a holy life. Abiding in Him we become partakers of the divine nature and have the assurance of salvation now and in the judgment. (Gen. 3:15; Isa. 45:22; 53; Jer. 31:31-34; Ezek. 33:11; 36:25-27; Hab. 2:4; Mark 9:23, 24; John 3:3-8, 16; 16:8; Rom. 3:21-26; 5:6-10; 8:1-4, 14-17; 10:17; 12:2; 2 Cor. 5:17-21; Gal. 1:4; 3:13, 14, 26; 4:4-7; Eph. 2:4-10; Col. 1:13, 14; Titus 3:3-7; Heb. 8:7-12; 1 Peter 1:23; 2:21, 22; 2 Peter 1:3, 4; Rev. 13:8.)"

TEACHING

I. GETTING STARTED

Activity

Refer the students to the What Do You Think? *section of their lesson. After they have completed it, discuss their responses.*

Illustration

To get the full impact of this story it is helpful to understand the social etiquette in the ancient world. A fun way to introduce the topic of etiquette is to give a short quiz about etiquette while eating, traveling, shopping, attending classical music concerts, etc. Prepare your questions ahead of time.

II. TEACHING THE STORY

Bridge to the Story

Pastor John Ortberg in his book *Everybody's Normal Til You Get to Know Them*[2] uses an etiquette quiz as a way to introduce the story of Mary and point out how rude and offensive Simon's behavior would have been in the ancient culture. Bible scholar Kenneth Bailey[3] explains that a customary greeting was a kiss. To skip this ritual (as Simon did—Luke 7:45) was equivalent to ignoring someone. Also, the washing of feet was mandatory before a meal. If the guest was of high honor, the host would have done this himself. If not, a servant would have performed the duty. In any case, not seeing that Jesus' feet got washed (Luke 7:44) would be the equivalent today of asking guests to wash their own dishes after the meal. Simon also failed to anoint Jesus' head with oil (Luke 7:46). In ancient Palestine it was hot and people didn't have the luxury of deodorant; so this custom of dabbing a guest's head with oil was considered a refreshing, thoughtful gesture. Bailey summarizes: "The insult to Jesus has to be intentional and electrifies the assembled guests. War has been declared and everyone waits to see Jesus' response."

Out of the Story for Teachers

Divide your class into four groups and assign each group one of the following four passages: Matthew 26:6-13; Mark 14:3-11; Luke 7:36-50; and John 12:1-8. (If your group is small, assign each person one text.) Supply each group with a New International Version of the Bible. Explain to your class that this is one of those rare stories that can be found in all four of the Gospels. However, the details vary between the authors.

Instruct each group to carefully study their passage—noting all the details of their specific Gospel narrative. Allow the groups about 5 to 8 minutes to study, then reconvene the large group and play a variation of Bible Bowl in which they will answer by standing up if the detail you read is found in their account. They must answer as a united group; so they must decide together whether or not to stand. Every time they correctly stand or remain seated they score a point. The team with the most points wins. Of course, once the game starts they can no longer consult the Bible. Following the game have the groups share how they perceive the Gospel accounts to be different, and why they think each Gospel writer emphasized what he did.

Have your group stand if the following detail is included in your Gospel (the group that should be standing is in parentheses):

- The woman anointing Jesus is identified as Mary (John).
- The Pharisee hosting the party is identified as Simon (Matthew, Mark, and Luke).
- Mentions that it was an "alabaster flask" (Matthew, Mark, and Luke).
- Does not identify the location of this event as Bethany (Luke).
- Says that this woman "began to wet his feet with her tears" (Luke).

- Records that Jesus sat at a "table" (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John).
- Jesus explains that the poor will always be with us (Matthew, Mark, and John).
- Exposes Simon's rude breach of etiquette and his failure to wash feet, greet with a kiss, and anoint with oil (Luke).
- Has Jesus saying of Mary: "Wherever this [the] gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her" (Matthew 26:13; Mark 14:9, NIV).

Sharing Context and Background

Use the following information to shed more light on the story for your students. Share it in your own words.

The Story. Most Bible commentaries suggest this story recorded in Matthew, Mark, and John is the same, but the story in Luke is a different event. *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* (vol. 5, pp. 764-767) argues that all four Gospels describe the same event.

Note: Luke's story of the supper at Simon's home is clearly identified in *The Desire of Ages* with that of the feast in the house of Simon of Bethany, as recorded in the other Gospels (*The Desire of Ages*, pp. 557-563). "Furthermore, the unnamed woman of Luke's account is identified with Mary of Bethany (DA 558-560, 566) and with Mary Magdalene, out of whom Jesus had cast seven demons (DA 568). Also, Simon himself is declared to be the one who had led Mary into sin at some previous time (DA 566)" (*The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, vol. 5, p. 767).

The Party List. As alluded to above, this narrative recorded in the different Gospels spells some confusion as to who was present. To clarify, here is a list of attendees at the party:

- **Simon:** A Pharisee whom Jesus had cured of leprosy. According to Ellen White, "Simon of Bethany was accounted a disciple of Jesus. He was one of the few Pharisees who had openly joined Christ's followers. He acknowledged Jesus as a teacher, and hoped that He might be the Messiah, but he had not accepted Him as a Saviour. His character was not transformed; his principles were unchanged " (*The Desire of Ages*, p. 557).
- **Lazarus:** Ellen White explains that on one side of Jesus sat Simon and on the other side sat "Lazarus, whom He had raised from the dead" (*The Desire of Ages*, p. 558).
- **Jesus:** It was in His honor that this feast was held.
- **Martha:** She served at the table.
- **Mary:** Devoted and grateful follower of Christ.

Teaching From . . .

Refer your students to the other sections of their lesson.

- **Key Text**
  Invite the students to share the key text with the class if they have committed it to memory.
- **Flashlight**
  Read the Flashlight *statement, pointing out that most of the time it is from the commentary on this week's story found in the book* The Desire of Ages. *Ask what relationship they see between the statement and what they have just discussed from* Out of the Story.
- **Punch Lines**
  Point out to your students the verses listed in their lesson that relate to this week's story. Have them share the verse that speaks most directly to them and allow them to explain why they chose it.
- **Further Insight**
  Ask them how the quotes in Further Insight *convey the point of the story in this lesson.*

Tips for Top-Notch Teaching

RABBI 101

Teaching Gratitude

Jennifer Wolf at www.about.com shares these tips on how to teach gratitude and appreciation:

1. **Keep a gratitude journal.** Write down five things each day for which you're grateful.
2. **Express your thanks out loud.** It's helpful to have each person in your youth group share something verbally that they appreciate.
3. **Write a letter of thanks.** Don't keep your gratitude to yourself! When you feel thankful for certain people in your life, be bold enough to put it in a letter.
4. **Be grateful for the challenging times, too.** Share with your youth group some of the challenging times you've gone through in life that you are grateful for now.
5. **Make it a habit.** Learning to be truly grateful can change your life. One way to continue a new "attitude of gratitude" is to create a habit around your thankfulness.

III. CLOSING

Activity

Close with an activity and debrief it in your own words.

Have your students share or tell about some experiences or times in their lives when they felt like King David in Psalm 16:9. When did your kids feel their heart filled with joy and their tongue express happiness and praise? What was it about those experiences that made your kids feel thankful? And when they felt this happiness and joy, did they give God the honor and praise Him? Why or why not? How does their story intersect with the story of Mary's thankfulness?

Summary

Share the following story in your own words:

A fascinating study done by Professor Vicki Medvec reveals the relationship between the attitude of thankfulness and objective circumstances. Medvec studied Olympic medalists and discovered that bronze medalists were quantifiably happier than silver medalists. Here's why: silver medalists tended to focus on how close they came to winning gold, so they weren't satisfied with silver; bronze medalists tended to focus on how close they came to not winning a medal at all, so they were happy to just be on the medal stand.[4]

Questions to consider:

- Do you tend to view life from the bronze medal platform or the silver medal platform?
- How can we cultivate hearts of gratitude?

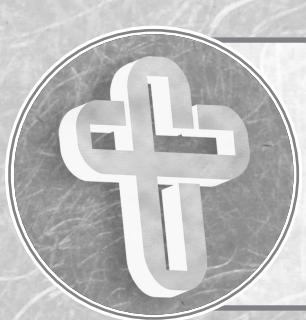
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[1] Proverbs 8:13 (NIV).

[2] John Ortberg, *Everybody's Normal Till You Get to Know Them* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House, 2003), p. 206.

[3] Kenneth Bailey, *Through Peasant Eyes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983).

[4] Mark Batterson, *In a Pit With a Lion on a Snowy Day* (Multnomah Publishers, 2006), p. 68.



Remind the students about the reading plan that will take them through the inspired commentary of the Bible, the Conflict of the Ages series. The reading that goes with this lesson is *The Desire of Ages* (or *Humble Hero*),* chapter 62.

*A special adaptation, *Humble Hero*, has been created just for you by the Ellen G. White Estate and Pacific Press® Publishing Association. Get more info about it at www.cornerstoneconnections.net.

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STUDENT LESSON

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Photo by Jacqui Janetzco

keytext

"A woman in that town who lived a sinful life learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee's house, so she came there with an alabaster jar of perfume. . . . She began to wet his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them."

(Luke 7:37, 38, NIV)

flashlight

"Christ delighted in the earnest desire of Mary to do the will of her Lord. He accepted the wealth of pure affection which His disciples did not, would not, understand. The desire that Mary had to do this service for her Lord was of more value to Christ than all the precious ointment in the world, because it expressed her appreciation of the world's Redeemer. It was the love of Christ that constrained her. The matchless excellence of the character of Christ filled her soul. That ointment was a symbol of the heart of the giver. It was the outward demonstration of a love fed by heavenly streams until it overflowed" (*The Desire of Ages*, p. 564).

what do you think?

Personalize the following prayer of thankfulness by filling in the blanks:

Dear God,

I worship You because You are _____. I know that You created me. You knit me together and nobody else in the universe has my unique _____. Thank You for the blessings You shower upon me. Thank You for _____. Thank You for _____. Thank You for _____. When I think about what an awesome God You are, all I can say is _____.

I am grateful. I love You.

Your child, _____.

did you know?

Did you notice that Matthew and Mark put this story of Mary in a different place chronologically than John does? In Matthew and Mark it occurs before the Last Supper. In John it happens before the triumphal entry. Most scholars believe that John orders the event correctly. Keep in mind that the main purpose of the Gospel authors was to preserve an accurate account of Jesus' teaching, not necessarily to give the exact chronological order of His life. Scholars surmise the reason that Matthew and Mark place this story where they did was to show the stark contrast between the devotion of Mary and the deceit of Judas. In both Matthew and Mark the story that follows is of Judas agreeing to betray Jesus.

INTO THE STORY

"When one of the Pharisees invited Jesus to have dinner with him, he went to the Pharisee's house and reclined at the table. A woman in that town who lived a sinful life learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee's house, so she came there with an alabaster jar of perfume. As she stood behind him at his feet weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them.

"When the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, 'If this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is—that she is a sinner.'

"Jesus answered him, 'Simon, I have something to tell you.'

" 'Tell me, teacher,' he said.

" 'Two people owed money to a certain moneylender. One owed him five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he forgave the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more?'

"Simon replied, 'I suppose the one who had the bigger debt forgiven.'

"'You have judged correctly,' Jesus said.

"Then he turned toward the woman and said to Simon, 'Do you see this woman? I came into your house. You did not give me any water for my feet, but she wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You did not give me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not put oil on my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet. Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven—as her great love has shown. But whoever has been forgiven little loves little.'

"Then Jesus said to her, 'Your sins are forgiven.'

"The other guests began to say among themselves, 'Who is this who even forgives sins?'

"Jesus said to the woman, 'Your faith has saved you; go in peace.'"

(Luke 7:36-50, NIV)

OUT OF THE STORY

What does this story teach us about the importance of humility?

_____
_____
_____

What does this story teach us about thanksgiving?

_____
_____
_____

What does this story teach us about the gospel?

_____
_____
_____

Contrast this story from Luke's perspective (Luke 7:36-50) with Matthew 26:6-13; Mark 14:3-11; and John 11:55-57; 12:1-11. In what ways are they similar? In what ways are they different? What does this comparison study tell you about each author?

Write one word to describe the following characters in the story:

Jesus: _____

The Pharisees: _____

Mary: _____

Judas: _____

punch lines

"The Lord says: 'These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship of me is based on merely human rules they have been taught'" **(Isaiah 29:13, NIV).**

"We do not dare to classify or compare ourselves with some who commend themselves. When they measure themselves by themselves and compare themselves with themselves, they are not wise" **(2 Corinthians 10:12, NIV).**

"A wife of noble character who can find? She is worth far more than rubies. . . . She opens her arms to the poor and extends her hands to the needy" **(Proverbs 31:10, 20, NIV).**

"Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful" **(Colossians 4:2, NIV).**

"Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus" **(1 Thessalonians 5:16-18, NIV).**

further insight

"Until time should be no more, that broken alabaster box would tell the story of the abundant love of God for a fallen race."—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 563

"When to human eyes her case appeared hopeless, Christ saw in Mary capabilities for good."—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 568

Sabbath

Read 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18.

Reflect on the blessings you enjoy while others your age are suffering of sickness, crisis situations, and inevitable disasters. Are you expressing your gratitude to God consistently, every day?

Do you tend to think, *Why me?* Or do you think, *I have everything if I have Jesus in my life*?

Sunday

Read Luke 7:41, 42.

Read the passage from *Into the Story* and reflect on the following question (you can use the Notes section in the back of this study guide to write your answers):

- What do you think was Mary's motivation in doing what she did?
- What was the motivation of the Pharisees in scorning this woman?
- Why do you suppose Jesus told the parable of the grateful debtor (Luke 7:41, 42) before chastising Simon?
- Read Luke 7:44-48. After Jesus made these statements, how do you think Simon felt? How do you think Mary felt?
- Read through the story again and *underline* all the times in the story that you think would have been awkward.

Monday

Read Luke 7:37, 38.

Memorize the *Key Text* and then consider this commentary from Glynnis Whitwer:

This lovely child of God offered her absolute best to Jesus, in spite of the fears and doubts she might have had.

- Her fear didn't stop her: "What will they think of me? They know who I am."
- Her shame didn't stop her: "I'm not worthy to approach Jesus."
- Her feelings of insignificance didn't stop her: "It's only a small bottle of perfume."
- The crowd of important people didn't stop her: "I don't belong there. Those people can offer Jesus more."

Nothing stopped this woman from showing Jesus love and gratitude in thanks for the new life He offered her. Giving Jesus our best doesn't always mean material goods. I believe what pleased Jesus more than the gift of perfume was the giver's heart of love ("Giving Jesus Our Best").

Do you always give your best to Jesus? Or does He get the leftovers of your time, talents, and resources? How can you follow Mary's example and demonstrate outrageous love toward the Savior?

_____

_____

_____

_____

Tuesday

Read 2 Corinthians 9:6, 7.

Read this week's *Flashlight*. Note that Ellen White points out that "the desire that Mary had to do this service for her Lord was of more value to Christ than all the precious ointment in the world." In other words, what matters to Jesus is not the size of the gift, but the heart of the giver.

With that in mind, consider this story: The ornament on my desk this morning caught me by surprise. It wasn't the usual leftover bulletin. Or a piece of junk mail. Or a tattered *Insight* that someone forgot to take home on Sabbath. No, my Monday-morning surprise was a half-eaten graham cracker.

Pasted to the morsel was a Post-it from the head deacon: "Pastor Karl, this graham cracker was given by a 3-year-old boy for offering today. When I passed him the plate, he dug through his pockets and frowned. Then he looked around the seat—only to discover that he didn't have any money to give. He reached into his bag, took this out, and proudly announced, 'I give this to Jesus!'"

Wednesday

Read Psalm 16 and Psalm 17.

Write one word over each of the *Punch Lines* that summarizes the virtue that it teaches. For example, on Isaiah 29:13 you could write "authenticity" or "sincerity."

Thursday

Read 2 Corinthians 10:12.

With whom do you identify the most in this story? Why?

_____

_____

_____

_____

Friday

Read Deuteronomy 6:5.

Ellen White offers this insight into the story of Mary: "Christ values acts of heartfelt courtesy. . . . He did not refuse the simplest flower plucked by the hand of a child, and offered to Him in love. . . . In the Scriptures, Mary's anointing of Jesus is mentioned as distinguishing her from the other Marys. Acts of love and reverence for Jesus are an evidence of faith in Him as the Son of God" (*The Desire of Ages*, p. 564).

Given that "acts of love and reverence for Jesus are an evidence of faith in Him," what have I done lately that demonstrates my faith in Jesus?

this week's reading*

The Desire of Ages (or *Humble Hero*), chapter 62.

*A special adaptation of *The Desire of Ages*, entitled *Humble Hero*, has been created just for you by the Ellen G. White Estate and Pacific Press® Publishing Association. Get more info about it at: www.cornerstoneconnections.net. By following this plan you will read at least one book of the Conflict of the Ages series each year.