

# Serving, Reclining, Anointing

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] Well, today we are continuing our study on John's Gospel. We have come to chapter 12, and I want to read again, verses 1 to 3. Six days before the Passover, Jesus, therefore, came to Bethany, where Lazarus was, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. So they gave a dinner for him there. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those reclining with him at table.

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. These verses describe one of my favorite scenes in the Gospel. In chapter 11, you'll remember from the last couple of weeks, we saw one of the most famous and astonishing events of all of history. Lazarus is raised from the dead. Jesus came and called him out to the tomb, and that prompts both amazement and opposition in equal measure. On the one hand, you've got people who saw that and believed in Jesus. But on the other hand, you had religious leaders who became more and more determined to kill Jesus and get rid of him. So last couple of Sundays, we've had these great events of John chapter 11. What I love is the fact that after these astonishing events of the previous chapter, the next thing that we find Jesus doing here in John 12 is having dinner with his friends. So the Messiah who calls a dead man out of a tomb is also the friend who comes round for dinner. He loves to eat and to chill out with his friends.

And I want us to think about that a wee bit more. I want us to look at this meal, and especially, I want us to look at three key words that we find in these verses and that are going to be our title. We're going to think about the word serving. We're going to think about the word reclining, and we're going to think about the word anointing. Martha served Jesus. Lazarus reclined at the table with him, and Mary anointed Jesus with beautiful, expensive perfume. Now, when we have these three words, you might be interested in thinking, Thomas, this is a million miles from my life. And these words and this scene is from a different world. You look at those three words, serving is probably the one that we can maybe relate to, but reclining and anointing, that seems that seems a world away from what this week is going to bring for you and for me. Is it all a million miles away? Well, actually no. Actually not at all. Because what I hope that we're going to see today is that these three words describe everything that you can see going on in the culture around you. And they describe three massive influences on your life, serving, reclining, and anointing are three incredibly important words for us all to think about. This week, today, I've got two point one sermon points. So I've got two main sermon points, and I've got a point one sermon point at the very end. The main ones are to say that serving, reclining, and anointing lie at the heart of what the people around us are searching for. And the second is to say that serving, reclining, and anointing, they lie at the heart of what the gospel offers you.

Two point one points. Serving, reclining, and anointing is what the world is searching for. It's what lies at the heart of the gospel. And then point one is a bonus point to the end. So first of all, I want us to think about how the fact that these three words describe and what the people around us are searching for. And we'll understand that and recognize that if we think a little bit more about what these words involved. Martha was serving. That's the easiest one for us to understand. That's very familiar with us still. Martha's making sure that her friends are fed. So she's working away. And her role is crucial if this meal is going to be a success. And that's a very important and a very good thing to do. And it's important to say that when we mentioned Martha serving here, our minds might immediately be drawn to the passage that that Phil was looking at a week or two ago in Luke 10, where you had Martha serving and Jesus and Mary sitting at Jesus' feet. And when you read that passage, you know, you could think, oh, well, serving is maybe not a good thing to do because, you know, Martha was serving, but Jesus commended

Mary for just listening. But it's very important that we remember that Jesus didn't rebuke Martha for serving. He rebuked Martha for resenting the fact that Mary was sitting and listening. She said to him, Lord, don't you care that my sister's left me to serve? And the Lord said to her, Martha, Martha, you're anxious and troubled about many things. But one thing is necessary. Martha has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her. So there's an important message in that passage, but it doesn't negate the fact that serving is a good thing. And it's deeply valued in the Bible. Martha is serving. And she has a role, a focus, and a purpose that benefits others. Lazarus was reclining. Now, when we hear that word, we might think of sitting in front of the TV or lying on the beach or beside the pool on holiday in the Mediterranean. That's not what it's referring to. Here it means a different thing. In New Testament times, reclining was the posture for having a meal. And so what you had, tables and chairs didn't work in the way that they work with us. You know, we have a high table and you have a chair that you sit at. In the ancient Near East, 2000 years ago, you had a low table about this high off the ground. And instead of sitting in a chair, you lay beside the table and you would have your legs stretched out behind you. You would rest on one elbow and you would use your other hand to take the food that's on the table. So when you think of people having a meal in the Old Testament, you mustn't think of people sitting around the table like we do. You need to think of people lying down around the table. And the word that we used to describe that lying down is the word reclining. And so you have this scene, a low table, and you had all, everybody around the table and their legs would have been extended out behind them as they lent on one elbow, eating the meal and sharing the food together.

[ 7 : 11 ] And that scene is a beautiful one. They're friends taking food, relaxing, talking and listening. And I want you to imagine that the buzz of conversation as they talked, the enjoyment of lovely food that Martha is preparing for them, laughter as they chatted, questions, silence as they thought about the things that they were discussing and lots and lots of listening. And so this low table and this reclining is a place where you are fed both in your body and in your mind. Lazarus is reclining.

He's with his friends. He's been refreshed and nourished. He's been stimulated and taught. And then we have Mary, who is anointing. And that's maybe the most fascinating of all. Jesus is at the table. Remember, he said his legs would have been extended out behind him. He's reclining nearly as he has his meal. And Mary comes and she opens an incredibly expensive bottle of perfume.

And she anoints Jesus' feet, filling the house with the fragrance. And that is an act of deep devotion. And in many ways it broke social norms for her to do that, particularly the fact that she used her hair to wipe his feet. And in that culture, a woman would not let her hair down in public. But she didn't care what the social norms were. She didn't care what people thought she wanted to do this for Jesus. And it would have been extremely costly. Because as we found out later in the passage, that perfume was worth 300 dinarai. Dinarai was what you were paid for one day's labor. So 300 dinarai is a year's labor, a year's wages for a laborer. And so it's a hugely costly act. But she didn't care about the cost. She didn't care about the criticism. She wanted to anoint Jesus. And she did that because she can see that he's unique. She can see that he is more important than anything else. And she just wants to pour her devotion towards him. And as we think about all of that, what I hope that you can see is that these words are not just describing the dining practices of New Testament Palestine. These words are describing what everybody in the world around us is searching for. Because people want to serve. People want to have a role. They want a sense of purpose in their life. They want to do something that's going to benefit others that's going to make a difference. And that can be something huge. It can be something tiny. But it's all a quest for the same thing. And we can look for that role, that opportunity to serve in loads of different places. An obvious example would be our jobs. People want to work and they want that to be fulfilling. And they want it to be meaningful and they want their contribution to their job to make a difference. But it's not just in our jobs. People want to serve their spouse. They want to serve their children. They want to serve their community. They even want to serve their country.

And regardless of what people believe, you will see this pattern of behavior all across the world. And in fact, you'll see amazing acts of service as people want to do something that makes a difference.

Serving is something that we long to do. And that desire to serve is confirmed by the fact that when you see people who are struggling with their self-esteem and when you see people and their self-worth is at rock bottom, very often you will find that they are crippled by the same feeling.

[ 11 : 15 ] They feel useless. They look at everybody else and they think they're serving. They're making a difference. I'm useless. And the reason that feeling of feeling like we're useless, even though no one is, the fact that we feel like that and the reason that feeling is so horrible is because we long to have a meaningful role in life. People want to serve. People also want to recline. Now, I don't mean in terms of necessarily lying at a table and I don't mean in terms of flicking up the recliner at home and watching Netflix, although sometimes we do want to do that. It's not what I mean. What I mean is that people want to have those moments when we enjoy good company. Those moments when we can be part of a stimulating conversation. Those times when we can enjoy relaxing with people we respect. And often that's around a meal, still in our culture, but it can be in other places. It can be on a walk. It can be on your phone, even either spoken or through text messages or a group chat. It can be over a coffee. It can be at a cafe. It can be in a pub. It can be around a board game. All around us people are looking for those settings where we can be with other people, where we can experience company and conversation that is relaxed and that's enjoyable and stimulating. And I'm no different. I love all of that. I love football chat. I love sitting around with people and just talking about football. I love that. I love what's happening in the free church chat. This is probably what makes me a bit weird, but sitting and talking to people and you hear what's going on elsewhere. I love that. I love talking about football. I love talking about that. And everybody loves who's related to who chat. When we sit down and we make all these connections, people love enjoying that time with people they respect and admire. In other words, people long to be able to recline like Lazarus did with Jesus and the other she would hear. And people also want to anoint. Now you might be thinking, not really, no they don't or today if you were to go up to somebody put perfume on their feet, that actually would probably be seen as very offensive and that would be an invasion of space and privacy that people today would not like at all. And so I'm not meaning it in that narrow sense of trying to find somebody to pour perfume onto. That's not what I mean. What I mean is broader. I mean the fact that everybody wants to find something in life that is special. Something that they can devote themselves to.

Something that they can pour their resources and energy into. Everybody is looking for that. Everybody wants to find something in their life that is worth opening your most expensive bottle of perfume for. And there's loads of things that that can be. Some people anoint their careers and everything has to fit around this career that they are trying to advance and that they must achieve.

Some people anoint their houses and it's like I just want my house to be perfect and for it to be the place where I can spend my life. Some people anoint the person that they're in love with and they are like whatever happens I have to keep this person happy. I have to please them. I have to give them everything that they ever want. Some people do that with their children and anoint their children thinking I must make my life my children's life perfect. Everything has to be for them. There can be loads of other things as well. Some people anoint their football team and their whole lives are devoted to just unwavering support to the team that they love. Some people anoint their politics and they will pick a particular cause or party or issue and everything is poured into that. Some people anoint their social life and that's the thing that you live Monday and Monday to Friday or you endure Monday to Friday so you can enjoy what the weekend will bring. Some people anoint their holidays and that's everything that they aim for as the weeks and months go by. There's many others as well. People will pour themselves into one great goal and that becomes the focal point of their lives. It becomes the object of their devotion. It becomes the thing that they will pour themselves into. People are desperately searching for something to anoint.

Something that will be just that thing that becomes the most important thing of their lives. And when we start talking in those terms we realize that serving, reclining, anointing, they aren't obscure words from 2000 years ago. They describe what everyone around us is doing and they describe what you will be doing in the week ahead as well. Because you will be looking for ways to serve. Some tasks and responsibilities in a role that are going to give you a sense of purpose and achievement. Nobody in here is thinking I want to completely waste every minute of the next week of my life. None of you think like that. We're looking for ways to serve.

You're looking for somewhere to recline a place that's going to refresh you and stimulate you, give you good things to think about, good things to talk about and you will be looking for something to anoint. Something that you're working towards, something that you're going to invest your time, your energy, your money or all three of them into. Something that's going to make this week worth living. Now a lot of that is good and please don't misunderstand me and think that I'm saying all that's awful. I'm not saying that's awful at all. A lot of that is really, really good.

[ 17 : 44 ] There are so many brilliant ways to serve and you are all such a brilliant example of that. Our community is full of people who serve in wonderful ways. There are so many brilliant examples of people reclining in each other's company and enjoying it. I've enjoyed all of your company at different times in my life and you've enjoyed each other. All of that's so good and there are so many opportunities and needs that are worth pouring ourselves into and that are worth recognizing that they're important. However, the massive problem that our culture around us faces and that we can face as well, the massive problem is that our desire to serve, our longing to recline and our search for something to anoint can lead us to places that will ultimately leave us empty.

And this is the crucial point that we've got to recognize and this is where your God's word stops us in our tracks and gets us to think about our lives because it's so easy to think that as we blast through life, as we fly from one week into the next, one month into the next, one year into the next, it's so easy to think that as we just bash on serving, reclining and anointing, it's easy to think that we are filling up our lives and sometimes that's what we're trying to do, we want to fill our lives with stuff and in a sense that's too, there is a lot of fulfillment in serving, in reclining and anointing. As we do that, as we go from one week to the next, there is one sense in which that stuff will help give us a sense of fulfillment, but the key point is this, the real truth is the fact that as we serve, recline and anoint, as we press on through each week, each month, each year in what we are doing, ultimately we are not filling up our lives, we are using up our lives.

And when we reach the end, after all our serving, reclining and anointing is done, what will you have left? And the big question is this, will you just have stuff to look back on?

Or will you have something amazing to look forward to? And maybe if I can mention him for a moment, Jimmy Craig, he had a long, long life, over 90 years old, he had loads to look back on, but when Douglas, his son, phoned me this morning to say that he'd passed away, he said, we are rejoicing and it wasn't because of everything that Jimmy could look back on, it was because of everything that Jimmy was looking forward to, and the fact that now he's taken home to be with Jesus.

And that's what the gospel is all about, that's the whole reason why Jesus came, and that's why the gospel is so utterly brilliant, because it gives us an eternal foundation for our serving, reclining and anointing. It gives us a foundation and a fullness to life that nothing else can give.

[ 21 : 40 ] And that's what I want us to see very quickly in our second point, that serving, reclining and anointing, this lies at the heart of what the gospel is offering you. In these verses, the serving, the reclining and anointing all have their focus on Jesus, and the claim of the gospel, and the biggest discovery of my life, is that having Jesus as the focus of your serving, your reclining and your anointing is just amazing, it is just brilliant. And he gives your life a foundation, a meaning and a destiny that nothing else can match. And that's because Jesus is an amazing person to serve. He is an absolutely wonderful person to serve. Following Jesus gives us, gives our lives purpose and opportunity and deep fulfillment. And that's because, it's because of two amazing things, it's because of the fact that Jesus cares about what you do with your life right now. He cares about what you do with this week. He cares about what you do with

Monday morning tomorrow. And with him, none of it is wasted or pointless or meaningless. Even this week, he can do wonderful things through you. He can make your life an amazing blessing to others.

So Jesus cares about what we do now, but he also cares about what we're going to do for eternity. About the fact that beyond the physical realities of life on earth, there is a spiritual reality that is eternal. And Jesus cares about that. And by his grace, we can serve him in a way now that doesn't just make a difference for this week. We can serve him in a way that makes a difference for eternity as we share the gospel and as other people come to faith. And that's why serving Jesus is never, ever dull or restrictive or boring. It is so exciting. And following Jesus this week is so exciting. And the amazing thing with Jesus is that you're serving of him. It doesn't have to be spectacular. It doesn't have to be something massive. You could even, you could even send a tiny text message to somebody today that Jesus can use to make a massive difference in their lives. If you are a Christian, or if you become a Christian, this week is an opportunity to serve God Almighty, the Creator of the universe, the King who reigns over all. You're serving him. You're useful to him.

You are a delight to him. And as we serve him, we're not doing that in order for him to sign earner favour in front of him. We're not doing it as a request. We're doing it as a response.

We serve Jesus because he's done so much for us. And we're so thankful. Jesus is also the best person to recline with. Now, obviously, Jesus has returned to heaven now. So we don't have a meal with him in the same way that we have here in this passage. But that does not mean for one second that you cannot spend time with Jesus today and this week. And we can do that on our own. We can do that by praying, reading, listening, and thinking. And that's a really important thing for you all to think about. You know, this week, maybe even each day this week, can you put aside 10 minutes, either in the morning or the evening or at some point to think, well, I'm going to read a wee bit of the Bible, and I'm going to pray. And I'm going to think maybe you do that already. And that's such a healthy thing to do. Keep doing it. If you don't do it, try it. Try it. Try it. Spending time with

[ 25 : 40 ] Jesus on your own is so good. And please don't think of that as a requirement like Jesus is waiting to take off your attendance. It's not like that at all. It's not. Don't think of it as a requirement. Think of it as a refreshment to come to him and be fed and nourished by him.

But we can also recline with Jesus with others. And that's what we have in this passage. And it's so important that we recognize that one of the coolest things of it being a Christian is when you meet up with brothers and sisters who are at different stages on the journey as Christians.

Some who have been following Jesus for years, some who are maybe only just starting, some who are maybe not even sure if they've started yet, some who are like the rest of us somewhere in the middle.

And you meet together and you relax together and you talk together, ask questions, you think about things. And then you talk some more and you enjoy reclining together in the presence of one another and in the presence of Jesus. That's what we do on Thursday evenings. That's what Thursday evening involves. It's not some intimidating thing. It's just we just get in the wee room at the back, we sit in a circle, we pray, we talk, we read, we laugh, and we seek to help each other along the way. And so if you've not come along on a Thursday evening before, please come. And this is a terrible week for me to say that because we're not meeting on Thursday this week. But still, put it in your diary for a week Thursday. Please just come. It's really not a big deal. It's just reclining together.

We can do that as a church. We can do it in our homes as well. We can do it on a walk together. Reclining together with Jesus is a place where you will be fed. It's a place where your thirst gets quenched. And then we also have to recognize that Jesus is the only one that we should anoint.

[ 27 : 32 ] If we're talking about anointing the ultimate thing in our lives, that should only ever be Jesus. It's okay to have things in life that are important. And it's okay to have interests and passions that you are deeply committed to. That is all okay. It is not okay to make those things the most important thing in your life because that is to make it your God. The most important thing in your life is your God. And that should only ever be actually God. And that's where we need to recognize the importance of this broader concept of anointing that we've been trying to think about. Mary poured out a year's worth of wages in her love for Jesus. What do you pour a year's worth of energy?

A year's worth of affection, of time, of resources into. In other words, what's getting your best? And as you think about that question, you have to ask the supplementary question, does it deserve your best? And to answer that question, the question that the the thing I've given you another question below that, but anyway, keep keep with me. The question below that that you have to answer, ask yourself this, is not what value do I place in the thing that I am anointing?

So whatever it is to think, you know, what value do I place on that? That's the wrong question. The question to ask is, what value does it place on you? All around us, people are anointing stuff, they're pouring themselves into stuff. And we think, you know, well, I think that's really valuable. That's the wrong question. The question is, does it think you're valuable? Does the thing that you're anointing value you?

And that's a crucial question because, because ultimately, and I hope that this does not sound depressing when I say it, it's true, though, ultimately, your career, your political party, your environmental cause, your community involvement, your sporting passion, and even your descendants are going to forget about you.

200 years ago, a man and a woman would have met, they'd have got married, they'd have had a baby. That man and woman will probably be my great, great, great, great, great, great grandparents.

[ 30 : 28 ] My existence completely depends on them. I have no idea who they are. Because, as scripture says, our lives arise like grass in the field, and then the wind passes over.

And it's gone. Even the things just now that we pour ourselves into, and we think they would never forget us, ultimately they will, but Jesus won't. Jesus won't. He never, ever will.

He will never forget about you. In fact, he came and he died so that you will never be forgotten, so that you can be safe forever. And so that when the day that your life comes to an end, the people who love you are not left thinking that's it. They are left rejoicing that Jesus has taken you home. Only Jesus can do that. And that's why he's the one that we should anoint with our faith and our worship. Serving, reclining, and anointing, these lie at the heart of everything that the gospel offers you. And it's just so good. The gospel meets our needs. And if the culture around us could just realize that we would see that they would see that Jesus is the only one who will meet their needs as well. Now, a final, a tiny wee point here to note is that as we say all of this, if you are a Christian or if you become a Christian, some people are going to think that you're nuts. And that's what happens here. Judas thought that Mary was nuts and he objects to the fact that she wasted and squandered the valuable perfume. The chief priests saw that they were nuts, thought that they were nuts, and they wanted to kill not just Jesus but Lazarus because they felt that so many people were being led astray. And lots of other people may think it as well.

And it's not easy when that happens. It's not easy when people think badly of us. And I know that for many of you here, that can be a huge issue that you think, well, I know I want to follow Jesus, but I am worried about what people will think of me. And deep down, I'm sure you're probably worried that they will think that you're nuts. My advice to you would be this. Let them think that you're nuts. Let them think that because they'll soon see that you're not. And as they see the difference that following Jesus makes in your life, there is every chance that they will soon stop thinking that you're nuts and they'll start thinking that they are the ones who are crazy for not following Him as well. So serving, reclining and anointing, they lie at the heart of what the world is looking for. They lie at the heart of what the gospel is offering us. But you remember I said that I had 2.1 points. And so I need to give you the point one in my final minute. These 3 words also lie at the heart of what it means to be a member of the church.

And as we look ahead to our communion weekend, I know that there are many among you here who want to take that step, who want to become members of the church. I know that at the very same time, you don't feel ready to take that step. And yet I know that you also think to yourself, I should take that step. And so you think I want to do it, I can't do it, I should do it, I'm stuck.

[ 34 : 44 ] And I think that there are many people in here who think about membership of the church and their foot is like this and they're frozen. And you want to do it, but you've been held back and you think I don't know if I can do it. And like we were saying to the children, you're thinking I'm not ready yet and I need to be ready. No one's ever ready. No one's ever ready. And it's not about becoming ready or sorted on experts. Instead becoming a member is just a simple, beautiful thing to do. It's an opportunity to serve. You can just serve in our local church. It's an opportunity to recline as you enjoy being part of the church family together. And it's an opportunity to publicly anoint Jesus, to take the bread and wine and to say to everyone, I love Jesus. I want to follow him. And so please, if you are thinking about that, if your foot is there, then I want you to tell me.

And I want you to talk to me and we'll help you take that step. Let's pray together.