

BETHANY

THE LORD'S DESIRE FOR HIS CHURCH

by Frank Viola

May 11, 2007

Copyright 2007 Present Testimony Ministry - www.ptmin.org

Good Faith Agreement—Please Read

This eBook is a transcribed message that Frank delivered to a house church in St. Augustine, Florida on April 22, 2007. This message is suited for all house churches, simple churches, organic churches, and emerging churches who are rethinking the meaning and practice of church. We have converted it into a free eBook so that it can be distributed far and wide. We simply ask that as a good faith agreement, you pass the following link on to others in any form you wish—especially those who gather in the above types of churches—so that they can download the book for themselves:

www.ptmin.org/bethany.htm

CONTENTS

Introduction	4
Encounter 1	6
Encounter 2	12
Encounter 3	16
Encounter 4	23

INTRODUCTION

When the Lord Jesus Christ entered this world, He was not received.

Do you remember His birth? The entire town of Bethlehem closed its doors to Him. So He was born in a stable amid the stain and stench of cow dung.

When He was two years old, He was hunted by the government. (There were no boys in his kindergarten class.)

Then, when He began His ministry, He was rejected by His own people—the Jews. “He came unto His own, and His own received Him not” (John 1:11).

The religious leaders who dominated Jerusalem also rejected Him. Remember how He wept over the city because they rejected their Messiah (Luke 13:34).

When He sought entrance into Samaria, He was rejected by that city as well. “For the people there did not receive Him because He was headed toward Jerusalem” (Luke 9:53).

He was also rejected by His own hometown, Nazareth. Remember His words—“A prophet is without honor in his own hometown” (Mark 6:4).

In fact, the Lord Himself said that He had no home in this world. “Foxes have holes, and birds have nests; but the Son of man has no place to lay His head” (Luke 9:58).

Do you see the irony? Here is the Creator of the universe. Here is the One who not only made all things, but the One for whom all things were made. And He is rejected by the very world that He created. He is neither welcomed nor received.

There was only one exception. Throughout His entire human life, there was only one place on earth where Jesus Christ was welcomed. There was only one place where He was received. It was a little village called Bethany. And it played a prominent role in the Lord’s life.

This afternoon, I would like to trace the footsteps of the Lord as He traveled to the village of Bethany. My reason for doing so is simple. I believe that Bethany represents the Lord’s desire for His church. God wants a Bethany in every city on this planet. That includes Saint Augustine, Florida.

The Gospels give us four narratives which take place in Bethany. Before we look at each one, I want to give you the historical context of this little village.

- Bethany was a little less than two miles east of Jerusalem.
- It was located on the southeastern slopes of the Mount of Olives.
- The garden of Gethsemene was also located on the Mount of Olives. Gethsemene means “olive press.” It was the place where the olives were pressed.
- On the six days preceding His crucifixion, Jesus went to the city of Jerusalem in the daytime, but He always retreated to Bethany to spend the night. Repeat: The last six days of the Lord’s earthly life, Jesus Christ retreated to Bethany and lodged there. In Bethany, He found refuge, rest, safety, and peace.
- Bethany means “house of figs.” This is significant as we shall later see.
- There were three people who lived in Bethany whom the Scripture says Jesus dearly loved: Martha, Mary, and Lazarus.
- It appears that Martha was the older sister. Mary was the younger sister. And Lazarus was the younger brother.
- There was also a fourth person who lived in Bethany—a man whom the New Testament calls “Simon the leper.” Some scholars believe that Simon was a relative to Martha, Mary, and Lazarus. Perhaps their father or uncle.
- Martha owned a home in Bethany. Mary was well known throughout the town. John calls Bethany, “*the town of Mary and her sister Martha.*”
- The family appears to have been well-off financially. (The size of Martha’s house and the type of tomb that was used for Lazarus are indicators of their financial status.)
- Bethany appears to be the only place on earth where the Lord Jesus was understood and recognized.

Let’s now look at the Lord’s first encounter with Bethany as it is recorded in Scripture.

ENCOUNTER 1

October A.D. 29

Now it happened as they went that He entered a certain village; and a certain woman named Martha welcomed Him into her house. And she had a sister called Mary, who also sat at Jesus' feet and heard His word. But Martha was distracted with much serving, and she approached Him and said, "Lord, do You not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Therefore tell her to help me." And Jesus answered and said to her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and troubled about many things. But one thing is needed, and Mary has chosen that good part, which will not be taken away from her." (Luke 10:38-42)

I think it's fair to say that most of the sermons that have been preached on this text have put Martha in a pretty dim light. Many a preacher has engaged in "Martha bashing."

Well, I'd like to say a kind word about Martha this afternoon. I want to draw your attention to verse 38—"*Martha welcomed Him into her home.*" Other translations say, "*Martha received Him into her home.*"

Receiving Jesus Christ

Bethany was the only place on this earth where Jesus Christ was completely and gladly received. It was the only place on earth where He felt at home.

This is the outstanding feature of Bethany. And it is the first mark of the church that God is after.

Jesus Christ was rejected in the world. But He was received in Bethany.

Now what does it mean to receive the Lord Jesus? I think that every church on this planet would claim that they receive the Lord. But I'd like to expand our understanding of what it means to properly receive Him.

How does a church give the Lord His proper and rightful place? This is a critical question. For upon it rests the whole matter of church restoration. I believe that the church will never be restored until we first understand how to receive the Lord properly.

It seems to me that there are three key aspects involved in the proper reception of Jesus Christ.

1) To receive Christ properly is to give Him the place of honor, supremacy, and centrality. I've been meeting in house churches for almost 20 years now. And in my personal judgment, there are not a whole lot of house churches that make Christ central and supreme. Something other than Jesus usually takes center stage.

But here's the tragic thing. Of the churches that do make Christ central, they tend to be part of elitist and sectarian movements. And by their practice and attitude, they betray the very Lord who they are endeavoring to gather around.

I have often made this statement: Sectarianism and elitism are like body odor. Everyone else can smell it except those who have it.

Make no mistake about it: Jesus Christ is not at home in a church that is elitist or sectarian.

Now we can camp right here and talk about what it means to make Christ central and supreme for the rest of the day. But we don't have time.

I will simply say that Jesus Christ will not take second place. He is not at home in any church that doesn't give Him the place of absolute supremacy and centrality. He wants to be more than a guest. He wants to be Master of the house.

It seems to me that many churches treat the Lord as if He were the invisible guest of honor. But a guest is still a visitor. Our Lord desires to be more than a guest. He seeks to be Head of His church. Only in such a place and among such a people can He feel at home.

2) To receive Christ is to receive all that He is. I've met some house churches that receive the Lord's preaching ministry, but they reject His healing ministry. I've met some churches that receive His ministry of blessing, but they reject His ministry of suffering. That is, they welcome the power of His resurrection, but they reject the fellowship of His sufferings.

I've met some churches that receive His ministry of teaching, but they reject His ministry of helping the poor and the oppressed. I've known some that want His ministry of building up the Body, but they reject His ministry of reaching the lost.

To receive Christ in this piece-meal fashion is to receive Him on *our own* terms. It's not to receive Him *as He is*.

To properly receive and welcome Jesus Christ is to receive *all* that He is. He's a whole Person. We can't say we want one part of you, but not the other parts.

Bethany is the place where Christ—*the whole Christ*—is welcomed and received.

3) To receive Christ is to receive all who are a part of Him. On several occasions, Jesus made this arresting statement: "He who receives those whom I send receives me."

Bethany is the place that receives all whom Christ sends. It also receives all who belong to Christ.

Any church that welcomes some members of the Body, but rejects others, is not receiving Christ. And any church that welcomes some whom the Lord has sent to His work, while rejecting others, is not receiving Christ.

The exception: We do not receive those who work against the mission of Christ which is unity. Those who are sectarian and who wish to “divide and conquer” into their movement, we cannot receive. That is the spirit of divisiveness, and it is anti-Christ (Romans 16:17).

Let me articulate a great temptation for house churches today. It is the temptation for us to become cloistered, ingrown, and insular.

Bethany receives all whom Christ has received. And they are welcomed.

To do otherwise is to say, “Lord, we’ll take your hand and your arm, but we don’t want your foot or your leg.”

To be exclusive is to dismember Jesus Christ. Plain and simple.

Interestingly, even unbelieving Jews were made to feel welcome in Bethany (John 12:6).

Bethany, like the Lord Jesus, is radically inclusive.

When Christ is welcomed among a people, He welcomes all who visit that people. There is a welcoming element . . . an inviting ingredient . . . that draws others in. It is the welcoming aroma of Jesus Christ.

We welcome Him, and He welcomes all who are His. That is the church.

Sadly, I’ve been to many house churches that did not provide an inviting or welcoming atmosphere to their visitors. Instead, they breathed an air of exclusivism and narrowness. Such things betray the spirit of Bethany, and they expose the fact that the Lord has not been fully received.

In short, the Lord is looking for a place where He is completely received and fully welcomed. Not Christ plus something else. And not Christ minus a part of Christ. But Christ all and in all.

God is looking for a people who will receive Christ as their everything. And that is the church as God would have it.

A Closer Look at Mary

Let’s go back to our story. Notice where Mary is sitting. She is at the Lord’s feet. This is the posture of a disciple (see Acts 22:3). What is she doing at His feet? She is hearing Him speak. Her gaze is fixed upon Christ. She is listening attentively to His Word.

The Twelve are also present, undoubtedly at His feet also. (Verse 38 makes it clear that they were there.)

What is this? This is a beautiful picture of a church meeting.

When we come together as a church, we come into the presence of Jesus Christ. He is in our midst. And . . . He is speaking.

In this story, Christ is speaking through His physical body. But today, He speaks through a different channel. We all know what that channel is, don't we? It's the pastor, right?

No! He speaks through His body still—His spiritual body. Not through a pastor. Not through a group of elders. But He speaks through us—the Body of Christ. (Pastors are like His little pinkys. Christ has an entire Body through which He speaks.)

We come together to adore Him, worship Him, and to hear Him speak His Word through one another. And by that Word we live.

Now here's a mark to hit: Every time you assemble together, when you walk out the door and leave the meeting, you ought to be able to say, "The Lord spoke to us afresh today and this is what He revealed of Himself to us."

That requires that each of us become a Mary. It requires that each of us sit at His feet during the week and learn of Him. And then when we all come together, we share what we have learned of Him with one another.

I'm a strong advocate of Christians getting together in pairs during the week to spend time with the Lord before the corporate meetings. Note that Mary wasn't sitting at the Lord's feet alone. The Twelve were with her also. And Lazarus may have been present as well.

So Bethany is the place where we sit at the Lord's feet *together*, and we submit ourselves to His Headship. This is the first lesson that every authentic church should learn.

Choosing the Better Part

This story is usually interpreted to be an example of the tension that exists between those who are given to outward service and those who are given to inward worship.

I think this way of looking at the story has some merit, but I don't want to take that tack today. I think it misses the greater point.

Let me give you some historical background which will throw fresh light on our story.

In Jesus' day, homes were divided into the male space and the female space. The kitchen was the domain of the women. (This is still the case in some countries, like Ethiopia.) Men do not enter the kitchen.

The public room was for the men. For a woman to settle down in the public room with the men was considered very inappropriate. Scandalous even.

The only two places where the men and the women shared was the marital bedroom and outside the house where the children played.

Now I want you to see the Lord Jesus walking into this home with His twelve disciples. Martha escorts Him and the Twelve into the public room—the space for the men. Jesus doesn't request a meal. Instead, He wishes to teach. So He begins speaking.

The Twelve are all gathered around Him, sitting at His feet. But something is strange about this picture. A woman is also present. And she too is seated at His feet.

Mary has crossed an invisible line. She has breached two social boundaries. First, she is sitting in the men's space. Second, she is sitting in the posture of a disciple. Now why is that significant? Because every rabbi in that day only had male disciples. Jesus was the exception. He welcomed women to be His disciples also.

Let's go over to the kitchen and look in on Martha. She has one thing in mind. She wants to give the Lord a proper welcome. She is preparing a *large* meal for Jesus and His disciples. She is slaving in the kitchen preparing the food, getting the plates out, taking out the best silverware, etc.

But as each minute goes by, she begins to fume. Her sister isn't helping her at all. Instead, she is in the public room seated at Jesus' feet like one of His male disciples. In other words, Mary is acting like a man!

Martha continues to work in the kitchen, hoping that Mary will get up and help her. She breaks a sweat. But she just can't take it any longer. She storms into the public room and protests to Jesus. "Mary isn't helping me. Don't you care! Tell her to help me!"

Martha was in effect saying, "My sister is in the public room acting like a man when she should be in the kitchen helping me!"

Notice that in the midst of Martha's protest, Mary is silent. She doesn't defend herself. She lets the Lord defend her. And He does.

The Lord's response to Martha is tender. "Martha, Martha, you are worried and troubled about many things. Mary is concerned with only one thing. And it is the most necessary thing. It is the better thing—*being my disciple.*"

"One thing is needful," He says. "And I won't take it away from her."

The Lord seems to be saying that the one thing that is necessary . . . the "better part," as some translations put it, is to know Him. And out of that knowing issues forth intelligent service. A service that flows out of love, friendship, and fellowship.

The greatest priority in life is to know the Lord. And that requires time at His feet. But something else is happening here.

Exposing the Heart

In Bethany, our temperaments, our dispositions, and our motives are exposed.

I want you to notice: Jesus didn't say that the many things that Martha was troubled about were wrong. He simply pointed out that only one thing was necessary.

I find it telling that Jesus never told Martha to stop serving. What He did was expose

the fact that her service was misguided and misdirected. Her heart was in the wrong place. She was tied up with the wrong thing. She was so occupied with preparing a proper meal that she didn't realize that God Himself was sitting in her living room!

And the Lord exposed it.

I can see Martha, feverishly serving, working, and toiling, but having no time to sit at the Lord's feet, loving Him, fellowshiping with Him, and discovering *how* He wishes to be served.

Point: Our service to the Lord ought always to flow out of our fellowship with Christ. Learn to sit at the Lord's feet and hear His word, then rise up and serve at His command.

So from this brief narrative, we discover four features about Bethany.

In Bethany Jesus Christ is utterly welcomed and received.

In Bethany, we sit at His presence, hear His Word, and share it with our brethren.

In Bethany, women are given the same privileges and the same status as men.

In Bethany, our temperaments, dispositions, and motives are exposed.

I now wish to give a word of exhortation to the church in St. Augustine and every other church that hears this message.

Be a Bethany.

Receive your Lord properly and completely. Make knowing Christ your chief pursuit. Learn to sit at His feet and hear His voice through one another. Let the Lord expose your hearts. And don't run away from one another when He does. Instead, accept His dealings. Why? So that there can be a home for Jesus Christ in this city. A Bethany, if you will.

Let's now move on to the second narrative.

ENCOUNTER 2

Early A.D. 30

Now a certain man was sick, Lazarus of Bethany, the town of Mary and her sister Martha . . . Therefore the sisters sent to Him, saying, "Lord, behold, he whom You love is sick" . . . Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. So, when He heard that he was sick, He stayed two more days in the place where He was . . . "Our friend Lazarus sleeps, but I go that I may wake him up" . . . Then, when Mary came where Jesus was, and saw Him, she fell down at His feet, saying to Him, "Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died" . . . Jesus wept . . . Then Jesus, again groaning in Himself, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone lay against it. Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of him who was dead, said to Him, "Lord, by this time there is a stench, for he has been dead four days" . . . Now when He had said these things, He cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come forth!" And he who had died came out bound hand and foot with graveclothes, and his face was wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Loose him, and let him go." (John 11:1-44)

This story, which I've abbreviated above, takes us further into the meaning of Bethany as it relates to the Lord's heart for His church.

Love and Friendship

Note that at the beginning of this narrative, we are told that Jesus *loved* Martha, Mary, and Lazarus. And that love was felt and understood. Listen to Mary and Martha's words, "He whom you love is sick."

The Lord's love for them wasn't an abstract idea. They knew it, and they were confident in it.

Notice also that Jesus called Lazarus His *friend*. Listen to His words: "Our friend Lazarus sleeps."

In John 15, the Lord said to His disciples, "I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you."

Love and friendship. These two words sum up the heart of Bethany. Bethany is the

place where Jesus Christ loves His own, and His own do not doubt it. It is also the place of friendship. Friendship with the living God.

These two words reveal the heart of Christ. He desires friends, not servants. He desires love, not servitude.

In the cold temple of Jerusalem, God was served. But in the warmth of a Bethany home, He was loved and befriended.

When I read this passage, I see a Lord who is saying, "I didn't come to this earth to be served. I came to have friends. I came to love and be loved. I came to take a people into my very bosom. I came to disclose the secrets of my heart to my friends. For I am at home with them."

This is the meaning of Bethany. And it's what the Lord is after in His church.

Crisis in Bethany

Let's go further. A crisis has occurred in Bethany. Lazarus has died. I'm impressed with the fact that Jesus is master of the situation. He's in complete control. There's no worry, no hurry, and no anxiety on His part. It is clear that He has heard from the Father on the entire situation.

Note that Martha acts according to character. She runs ahead of her sister.

But watch Mary. She is also acting according to character. She is at the Lord's feet again.

The scene is chaotic. Grief is all around Him. Mourning and sorrow are everywhere. His greatest enemy—death—has taken one whom He loves.

The Lord is deeply troubled and disturbed. Here we discover that God is sensitive to our sorrow. Even though He knows He's going to raise Lazarus from the dead, He is still touched by the sorrow that has afflicted Mary, Martha, and the whole village.

It is a heart-stopping moment. The One who created the universe is weeping at the grave of His friend. And He, the Resurrection and the Life, raises His friend from the dead.

Here we have another feature of Bethany. Crisis and then resurrection.

In resurrection, God starts all over again with a new creation. But resurrection always follows suffering and death.

There is crisis in Bethany. There is suffering in Bethany. And I will dare say, there is death in Bethany. The cross sits at the very center of a body of believers who are standing for the restoration of the church. They will experience death—dry spells, sufferings with one another, death to their agendas, aspirations, opinions, preferences, and ambitions. But this is how God builds His house. Out of the dying, the Lord's life is expressed and we are built together into a home for Jesus Christ. God brings death into our lives so that He can dispense His resurrection.

To put it another way: If you will make a home for the Lord Jesus Christ, hard times

will come. Crisis will come. Suffering will come. Difficulties with your brethren will come.

But remember: You can't have a resurrection without death. And you will never know a triumphant Lord until you are faced with a crisis.

The church lives in resurrection. But there must be death before the Lord's risen life can be made manifest.

Listen to Paul's words: "We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that His life may be revealed in our mortal body. So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you" (2 Corinthians 4:10-12).

When death comes into our lives, we tend to blame others. We don't like suffering, so we tend to blame those at whose hands it comes. But remember: God is the author of the cross as well as the resurrection which waits on the other side. And He is after transforming us into His image.

Suffering is a crucial part of that process.

I want to commend both Martha and Mary in their darkest hour. In the face of death, they clung to the Lord. He didn't meet their expectations or their hopes. To their minds, He *let* their brother die. Yet they still clung to Him in faith, regardless.

A God Who Waits Too Long

In Bethany, we discover a God who is willing to wait until it's too late. In this story, Jesus showed up four days too late.

Since I've given my life to the journey of restoring God's house, I have known a God who waited four days too late in my own life. I have known a God who seems to have the disturbing habit of leaving the scene when I most need Him. When things got rough, He would often bail out.

In Bethany, He will let His people die a long death. He will not always rescue you when you want Him to. He won't act according to your timetable every time. He will let you die. And then He'll wait four days before He does anything.

Think about that, would you? Death is hopeless. But four days after death is *beyond* hopeless.

Jesus Christ will wait until you are long dead. But then . . . when you least expect it . . . He will come leaping over the mountains in some strange and unforeseen way to do that which you never dreamed.

God will allow us to get into situations that are beyond human aid. Why? So that He might display the glory of His resurrection life. You see, resurrection is God's act alone. And that is why it always brings glory to Him.

So there is crisis in Bethany. There is death in Bethany. There is sorrow and

suffering. But there is also resurrection. And God can't dispense the latter until we are willing to embrace the former.

The power of His resurrection always follows the fellowship of His sufferings.

Never forget: He is Resurrection and He is Life. And if you outwait Him, He'll eventually roll the stone away and raise you from the dead.

But there is something beyond all of this. It's found in verse 44.

Freedom From All Things

Consider the Lord's command in verse 44. "Loose him and let him go." "Free him and let him go." "Unbind him and let him go."

What is this? This is freedom from bondage.

Look at Lazarus in the tomb. He is dead. His body is beginning to decay. Therefore, he stinks. He is bound with grave clothes. These are the clothes of death.

Jesus dispenses His resurrection life by His word. And what happens? Lazarus is made alive. He's made into a new creature. And He is freed from the bondage of his grave clothes.

"Unbind him and let him go!" Notice that this was a command to the crowd. Jesus did not unbind Lazarus. *He told the crowd to do it.*

I see two things here. First, Bethany is the place where God's people are set free from all bondages. Bondage to religion, bondage to the Law and the spirit of legalism, bondage to sin, bondage to the world, bondage to serving God in the flesh, and every other kind of bondage.

Second, we are the Lord's co-laborers in setting others free. It was as if the Lord was saying, "I want you to co-labor with me in bringing freedom to others. Since I have set you free, you are now my agents to set others free."

"Loose him and let him go," is the word that the Lord gave to those living in Bethany.

If the Lord has set me free, He has given me His power to set others free.

This is precisely what resurrection life does to us. It liberates us from all things except Christ Himself.

So Bethany is the place where the resurrection life of Christ is displayed in the midst of crisis, and it is the place where God's people are made free.

Let's now move on to the third narrative.

ENCOUNTER 3

March A.D. 30

Then, six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, where Lazarus was who had been dead, whom He had raised from the dead. There they made Him a supper; and Martha served, but Lazarus was one of those who sat at the table with Him. Then Mary took a pound of very costly oil of spikenard, anointed the feet of Jesus, and wiped His feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the oil. But one of His disciples, Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, who would betray Him, said, "Why was this fragrant oil not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?" This he said, not that he cared for the poor, but because he was a thief, and had the money box; and he used to take what was put in it. But Jesus said, "Let her alone; she has kept this for the day of My burial. For the poor you have with you always, but Me you do not have always." (John 12:1-8)

Here we have a matchless picture of what Bethany is all about. A feast is given in honor of Jesus. Jesus is seated as the head of the table. This is the place of honor, supremacy, and centrality. There is feasting, there is fellowship, and there is rejoicing.

This same story is recorded in Matthew 26 and Mark 14. And other details are given. I'm going to reconstruct the story combining all three accounts. (This narrative is not to be confused with the account of the sinful woman anointing Jesus in Luke 7.)

Feasting in the Lord's Presence

The feast is set in the home of Simon the leper. Simon was probably healed by Jesus in the past. In this scene, he is a cleansed leper. But even though Simon no longer has leprosy, he still carries a stigma. People still fear him. They still ostracize him.

But not Jesus.

Point: God's house is made up of cleansed lepers. That's what we all are. We were inflicted with the disease of spiritual leprosy, an apt metaphor of sin. And Jesus Christ touched and healed us.

Also present as a guest is Lazarus—a man who has been resurrected from the dead.

Cleansed lepers. Resurrected humans. All sitting around a table where Christ is Head—feasting, fellowshiping, and rejoicing with Him. That's Bethany. And that's the church.

Again, Martha is acting according to character. She is serving. But she's not worried

or troubled as she was before. Why? *Because Martha is serving in resurrection.*

Something has changed. You see, you cannot be around Jesus Christ for very long without changing. His presence changes us.

In Bethany, we are transformed by the Lord. We are changed by His resurrection life. And those things that bound us before are broken. Five months ago, Martha was serving in her flesh. But now she serves in resurrection. She is not worried, troubled, or distracted at all. She is serving her Lord without complaint, without the need to be noticed or exonerated. And she's not worried about what others are doing or not doing. Her service is in proportion to her fellowship, and she is free.

Mary is also acting according to character. For the third time, she is at the Lord's feet.

Now step back from this story and ask yourself what is going on. *This is a family feasting in the presence of Jesus Christ.* They are supping with Him and He with them. What a beautiful picture of the church.

Please notice that in addition to the Twelve, it was only four people with whom Jesus spent the last six days of His life. It was only four people who made a home for Him when He was rejected everywhere else: Mary, Martha, Lazarus and Simon. This is an indictment against the megachurch mentality.

Bethany was not large. It was a tiny village. The population was probably no more than 1,000. And that is the place that your Lord chose to make His home. What a witness to the fact that God is more concerned with quality than He is with quantity.

The Worth of Christ

I want you to see the table. The Twelve are there. Mary, Martha, and Lazarus are there. Simon is there. And Jesus is there. They are all reclining at the table, sharing a meal with one another.

Mary has with her a sealed flask of precious perfume. It's nard from India. Extremely expensive.

She breaks open the seal and pours out the perfume upon the Lord's head as though He were a king. As the perfume drips down His body and reaches His feet, she anoints His feet with the perfume as though she were a slave and He were her master.

Jesus interprets the act as preparation for His burial. She is anointing Him as one would a corpse.

(Anointing a dead body with perfume was done to prepare it for burial. The perfume would cover up the smell of the decaying corpse. Kings were anointed for burial by having perfume poured upon them from the head down. This is what Mary did for Jesus. It was as if she understood that the Lord wouldn't be with them much longer without realizing that she understood.)

Let's look at the value of this perfume.

It is worth 300 denarii. A denarii is a day's wage. Therefore, 300 denarii is one year's salary. Let me put this in contemporary terms so that you can feel the force of it. The average annual income in America today is \$46,000. Think: The value of that flask of perfume was the equivalent of \$46,000!

This was probably Mary's family inheritance. It represented her savings, her future, and her security. With that thought in mind, I'd like to make three observations about Mary's act:

1) Mary recognized the supreme worth of the Lord Jesus. And she proved it by her action. Mary took that which was most precious to her. And she gave it to the Lord Jesus. Not just some of it. But *all* of it. She poured the *entire* contents of the flask . . . one pound of perfume . . . upon her Lord.

What a picture of extravagant worship. What an illustration of extravagant loyalty. What a revealing of extravagant love and devotion.

Recall the words of Paul in Philippians 3: "I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ."

In Bethany, Jesus Christ is valued for His exceeding worth. In Bethany, it is understood that there is nothing too costly to lay at His feet.

2) The flask was shattered. When the flask was broken, the house was filled with the aroma of the perfume. The fragrance filled the house. Herein lies a great spiritual principle: When the vessel is broken, the fragrance pours forth.

When a people are allowing themselves to be broken by their Lord . . . when they are "wasting themselves" upon Him, the fragrance of His life can be sensed by those who come near.

There is nothing more precious on the face of this earth than a gathering of believers in whom the Lord feels at home. And when that takes place, there is an issuing forth of the aroma of Christ's presence that can be detected by those who visit them.

In Psalm 45, we are told that the Lord's garments smell of myrrh and aloes. Before the Lord Jesus was buried, Nicodemus put myrrh and aloes on His body. Now I ask: How much myrrh and aloes did Nicodemus pour upon the body of Jesus?

The answer: He used the same amount that was used for royal burials . . . 100 lbs. worth of myrrh and aloes (John 19:39, NASB). By this act, Nicodemus was testifying that he believed Jesus to indeed be a king.

Now think with me. The Lord's body was covered with 100 lbs. of fragrant spices. Therefore, when He was raised from the dead two days later, He was fragrant! And His fragrance could be smelled from afar.

Point: The resurrected Christ has a scent. He emits the fragrance of resurrection.

Now we may not physically smell Christ today, but we can spiritually sense His presence among us. And the fragrance of His presence is a mark of the Lord's nearness.

"The house was filled with the fragrance."

As Paul wrote, "But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of Him" (2 Corinthians 2:14).

3) Judas regarded Mary's act to be wasteful. Listen to the protest of Judas. According to the other accounts of this story, the Twelve reacted the same way that Judas did. What did they say? Three words: *Why this waste?*

"Why this waste? You could have helped the poor with this small fortune."

Mary's stunning act of devotion exposed their hearts.

There are few things that are as close to God's heart as helping the poor and the oppressed. Read your Old Testament. It's spilling over with God's concern for the plight of the poor. But as pre-eminently important as caring for the poor is, Jesus Christ Himself is more important. Christ is more important than any ministry, no matter how good or noble. It is possible to worship the god of "ministry" in place of Jesus Christ.

This is the second time in Scripture where Mary is being accused. And again, she doesn't defend herself. Jesus rises to her defense a second time: "Leave her alone," He says. "She has done a good work upon me."

The Lord was simply saying, "I am worthy. I won't be with you much longer. So I am worth the value of this perfume."

The disciples regarded it as waste. But it was neither a waste to the Lord nor to Mary.

What is waste? It's giving more than is necessary.

What Judas was really saying was, "The Lord isn't worth it."

The Most Valuable Thing

Let me ask you a question: What is the most valuable thing in your life? Besides your loved ones, what is most valuable to you?

I'll tell you what I believe to be the most valuable commodity for most people. It's something that many of us look back on with regrets. It's something that many people, especially as they grow older, feel that they have wasted.

Do you know what it is?

It's your time.

One of the most profound discussions I've ever had occurred in Portland, Oregon a few years ago. I held a three-day conference in that city. While I was there, a brother who attended the conference asked to speak to me privately. So we set up a time, and we met after one of the sessions.

He said, "Frank, I'm a businessman. A lot of money passes through my hands. But the most valuable thing in my life is my time. The fact that you took time out of your schedule to fly here . . . and the fact that you are taking time this weekend to talk with me tells me that you put a great deal of value on us."

I was impressed. Think about it: How you spend your time speaks volumes about what you hold dear. It speaks volumes about what you value in life.

This leads me to another question: How much time are you giving to Jesus Christ and His house?

I know some Christians who have set out to love their Lord together. They have set out to make a home for Him in their city. They've taken a stand for the restoration of the church where they live. Yet, they have given their time to so many other endeavors. And Jesus Christ has gotten shortchanged.

They have little time to pursue the Lord with their brothers and sisters in Christ. They have little time to assemble together to express Him with their brethren. They have little time to know Him in the church. Why? Because they have chosen to fill their time with so many other things.

The House of Figs

Mary anointed Jesus on a Saturday. On Sunday morning, Jesus entered the city of Jerusalem riding on a colt. He entered the holy city as a humble King (Mark 11:1-10).

Before sundown that same day, He left Jerusalem and returned to Bethany where He lodged (Mark 11:11). On Monday morning, He left for Jerusalem again. And on the way there, He hungered. He saw a fig tree with leaves. But upon closer examination, He discovered that there were no figs on it (Mark 11:14).

This was a strange situation. When a fig tree puts forth leaves, it is declaring that it has produced figs. But not so with this one. This was a defective tree. It was bearing a false testimony. It was announcing that it possessed figs, but it had none at all. So Jesus cursed it, and it withered away.

Point: The fig tree could not feed the Lord. It could not satisfy His heart. It didn't produce any figs. So He cursed it and it died. But there was a place that could feed Him. There was a place that could satisfy His heart.

At sundown, He returned to Bethany (Mark 11:19; Matthew 21:17).

And what happened in Bethany? Our Lord was fed. He was cared for. He was loved. And He was satisfied.

Bethany means house of figs. What a picture!

Do you know what the fig tree represents? Scholars agree that it represents Judaism, the old Hebrew religion. Like the fig tree that Jesus cursed, Israel put forth an outward show of religion. But in reality, it was an empty, hollow shell. It was not bearing fruit.

Israel was supposed to feed our Lord, but it did not. Instead, the nation rejected Him. He came to His own and His own received Him not. So He cursed the fig tree. And He declared that it would never yield figs again.

But thank God, there was a place that could feed Him. There was a people who would give Him rest and satisfaction. That place was Bethany—the house full of figs.

So you see: God has not only called you to receive the Lord Jesus, He has also called you to satisfy His heart.

A prophet is without honor in his own country. But Jesus Christ found a country in Bethany . . . a place that would receive Him and warm His heart.

A Penetrating Scenario

I would like to paint a scenario for you. Let's go back to the Friday which preceded the Saturday when Mary anointed Jesus.

I want you to imagine the Lord sitting down with Mary, Martha, Lazarus, and Simon. He says, "Dear friends, it is my last week on earth. I will visit Jerusalem every day, but I refuse to spend a single night there. Each night of the week, I wish to lodge with you in Bethany. Will you make a home for me? Will you take me in, feed me, and give me a place to lay my head?"

Mary says, "Well, Lord, I will only be available tomorrow. Every other day is occupied. I have prior commitments. I'm really sorry."

Martha says, "I'm sorry too, Lord. This week I have to take my nephew to soccer practice, I have a wedding to go to, and I have my cooking class. I'm sorry, but I'm just too busy."

The Lord looks over at Lazarus. Lazarus drops his head and says, "I'm terribly sorry, Lord. I'm only free tomorrow. The rest of the week I'll be out of town with friends. We're having a beach party over at the sea of Galilee all week long."

Finally, Simon responds, "I'm sorry too, Lord. Tomorrow is open and we can have a meal over at my place. But the rest of the week is booked. My favorite TV show comes on Monday night. Tuesday I work late, and I'll be too tired to be around anyone. Wednesday is bowling night. Thursday I have to visit an old friend. And Friday I have pottery class. I'm sorry—my life is just too full."

Let me translate the above excuses into one sentence: *Lord, you're not important enough for my time.*

The Lord is looking for a group of people who will give Him first place in their lives. He's after a people who refuse to be weighed down with this world and the cares of this temporal life.

He's after a people who will give one another their time. He's after a people who will gather together regularly . . . sitting at His feet *together*, feasting before Him *together*, loving Him *together*, knowing Him *together*, and expressing Him *together*.

The call to be a Bethany is *not* a call to individual prayer or Bible study. This is not at all what I'm saying. It is a call to live as a *community*—to live out your life in the context of a body of believers who are making a home for their Lord together . . . to give Him a place to lay His head. The early church gathered together daily in one form or another. They lived a shared life together.

The church does not exist to make you and me better citizens in society. That is incidental. It's not what the church is. The church is an alternative society. It's not a supplement to this world. It's a world of its own out of which we live our lives in society as God's people. And God's people live as a shared-life community.

Make no mistake about it: You cannot separate devotion to Jesus Christ from devotion to His house. God wants a Bethany. An extended family made up of sisters and brothers who give Christ His rightful place.

You can't be a home for Christ yourself. It takes a community of believers to do that. And it requires your time . . . a great deal of your time.

Let's now look at the fourth and final narrative.

ENCOUNTER 4

May A.D. 30

And He led them out as far as Bethany, and He lifted up His hands and blessed them. Now it came to pass, while He blessed them, that He was parted from them and carried up into heaven. And they worshiped Him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and were continually in the temple praising and blessing God. Amen. (Luke 24:50-53)

We have had a death in Bethany. We have also had a resurrection. But now we have an ascension.

In this narrative, we see Jesus Christ ascending into the heavenly realm. And from where did He ascend? *He ascended from Bethany.*

Notice the atmosphere here. There is blessing. There is worship. There is great joy. There is ascendancy. And after the Lord was taken into the heavens, His disciples continued to meet regularly in the temple courts to worship the living God. That is, they continued to be a Bethany for Him on the earth.

Seated Above All Things

There is so much in this passage. When Jesus Christ ascended, He was enthroned as absolute Head over all things. All things were placed under His feet (Ephesians 1:20-23).

Paul tells us that we too ascended with Christ, and we are seated with Him in heavenly places also (Ephesians 2:5-6).

We don't have time to explore all that this means, but I will simply say that if you take your place in Christ in heavenly places, your prayer life will change dramatically. No longer will you be making requests for God to make you into something. Instead, you will pray from an enthroned position with Christ, and you will declare what He has made you in Himself.

We are seated in heavenly places in Christ, and since all things are under His feet, all things are under our feet as well. It is our task to remind one another of this reality and believe it together.

Bethany is the place of spiritual ascension.

But there is something else. Since Christ has ascended, He has proven to be the Head over all things to the church. It is our responsibility, therefore, to submit to that

Headship and express it in the earth. In Bethany, Jesus Christ is given His rightful place as Head. Not a man. Not a group of men. But Christ as the exclusive Head. Not just in pious rhetoric, but in living reality. He is not simply a welcomed guest; He is the Master of the house. And that house becomes His house.

The Drawing Power of Bethany

I would like to make one final observation. In Acts 1, we have another account where Jesus ascends into the heavens. After the Lord ascends, an angel tells the disciples that the Lord will return *in the same manner* that He left.

There is a prophecy in Zechariah 14 which throws light on this, I think. It says that the Lord's feet shall stand in the Mount of Olives when He returns to the earth.

Now I have a question. Could it be that when Jesus Christ returns to this planet that He will return to the very place where He left . . . Bethany, on the Mount of Olives . . . thus sending a message to the entire world that spiritual Bethanies are what He is after and what will bring Him back?

Perhaps the message here is that Bethany possesses a Divine drawing power. When the Lord sees Bethanies all over this planet, He will return for His own. For He will be received. And He will take over this planet as Head over all things, both in heaven and on earth.

Summary

To summarize, Bethany was priceless to our Lord. And when the spirit of Bethany is present in a group of Christians today, it's still priceless to Him.

Bethany represents the Lord's heart for His church. God wants a Bethany in every city on this earth. The call to be a Bethany is the high calling to every Christian in this hour.

The earth awaits a group of Christians in every city who will receive the Son of God utterly and completely. A group who will enthrone Christ as Head over their gatherings and their corporate life rather than a pastor or a group of elders. A group who will esteem Jesus above all else and who will give Him His rightful place of supremacy and centrality. A group who will give themselves utterly to the Lord and to one another. A group who is willing to "waste" their lives on Him together . . . including their time.

The earth awaits such.

May our Lord have that which His soul longs for . . . a Bethany in every town—a place where He can lay His Head.

Will you pay the price to be part of such a place?

OTHER BOOKS BY FRANK VIOLA

Pagan Christianity? (co-authored with George Barna)

Reimagining Church

The Untold Story of the New Testament Church

The Church After God's Own Heart

Straight Talk to Pastors

Gathering in Homes

Rethinking the Will of God

For these titles and more, visit www.ptmin.org

To correspond with the author, email him at Violabooks@aol.com