

When Jesus had finished all these sayings, he said to his disciples, "You know that after two days the Passover is coming, and the Son of Man will be delivered up to be crucified." Then the chief priests and the elders of the people gathered in the palace of the high priest, whose name was Caiaphas, and plotted together in order to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him. But they said, "Not during the feast, lest there be an uproar among the people." Now when Jesus was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, a woman came up to him with an alabaster flask of very expensive ointment, and she poured it on his head as he reclined at table. And when the disciples saw it, they were indignant, saying, "Why this waste? For this could have been sold for a large sum and given to the poor." But Jesus, aware of this, said to them, "Why do you trouble the woman? For she has done a beautiful thing to me. For you always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me. In pouring this ointment on my body, she has done it to prepare me for burial. Truly, I say to you, wherever this gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will also be told in memory of her." Then one of the twelve, whose name was Judas Iscariot, went to the chief priests and said, "What will you give me if I deliver him over to you?" And they paid him thirty pieces of silver. And from that moment he sought an opportunity to betray him. Matthew 26.1-16

In July of 1997 Gareth Griffiths - a 27-year-old management consultant from London, England - was holidaying with friends in Florida when he decided to try sky diving. And so after taking a sky-diving class Gareth took off in a plane from Florida's Umatilla airport 35 miles north of Orlando to experience a tandem dive with 42-year-old Michael Costello, a highly experienced sky-diving instructor. Everything went fine as they reached their jump off elevation and departed the plane – but at 5,000 feet their shared main chute failed to open. And then, the backup chute failed too. And then the two men went into a violent spin as they plummeted towards the ground. It was then that Costello, the instructor, corrected the spin and regained control of the fall, placing Griffith on the bottom and the instructor on the top. But as they neared the ground, Costello, the instructor, folded his arms and legs, causing the pair to rotate, and in doing so, Costello hit the ground first, cushioning his student's blow. Griffith survived. Costello did not. He sacrificed his life so Gareth Griffith could live. In John 15:13 Jesus said: *"Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends."*

We are in the season that focuses on the greatest sacrifice of a life for another in all of human history. We will see that this morning, as we open our Bibles and enter the final section of Matthew's Gospel. Up to this point, Matthew's focus has been on Jesus' identity, his miracles, his teaching, his preaching, his rebuking, his warning and his judgement. But now, as we step into chapter 26, Matthew begins to specifically focus on Jesus' sacrifice on the cross for us and for all who give their lives to him.

When Jesus had finished all these sayings, he said to his disciples, "You know that after two days the Passover is coming, and the Son of Man will be delivered up to be crucified." Then the chief priests and the elders of the people gathered in the palace of the high priest, whose name was Caiaphas, and plotted together in order to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him. But they said, "Not during the feast, lest there be an uproar among the people." Matthew 26:1-5

Matthew opens chapter 26 by telling us that after Jesus *"had finished all these sayings"* - that is, after he had completed warning and telling the religious leaders and disciples and the crowds around him about the events that will surround his return (see chapters 24-25) - He then turned to his disciples and said: *"You know that after two days the Passover is coming, and the Son of Man will be delivered up to be crucified."* Now this was something that the disciples *should* have known. Jesus had already told them this a number of times. He gave the most detail in Matthew 20:18-19: *"We are going up to Jerusalem. And the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn him to death and deliver him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified, and he will be raised on the third day."* Jesus' words here reveal his absolute sovereign control over his sacrifice on the cross.

We clearly see the revelation Jesus' divine sovereign reign and rule over his sacrifice on the cross *because* he first told us *what* would happen. And then he told us *how* it would happen. And now, in today's text, we read he tells us *when* it would happen. It would happen on the "Passover" - just two days from that time. In other words, Jesus was telling them that he would be betrayed at the very same time as the Jewish people all over the land would be slaying the Passover lamb in obedience to the law of God; and that Jesus would also be crucified at the same time as they would be commemorating their deliverance from their bondage in Egypt. And we also see Jesus' sovereign hand in all these things - in that the "*chief priests and elders*" were assembling to plan to do something completely different. They were saying, "*NOT during the feast, lest there be an uproar among the people*" because they knew many of the Jewish people - who were beginning to believe in Jesus - would be present for the Passover feast. They didn't want to risk creating the kind of commotion that would force the Roman authorities down on them. So they specifically purposed *not* to take out Jesus during the Passover feast.

But Proverbs 16:9 says: "*The heart of man plans his way, but the Lord establishes his steps.*" That truth is really not a problem for us until we ignore or refuse to acknowledge God's sovereignty. The chief priests, elders, scribes, and Pharisees were of that mindset, even though they were the designated religious leaders of the people. They should have learned much earlier that they were not in control, for every effort they had made to kill Jesus earlier was thwarted. They had been plotting Jesus' death since Matthew 12:14 which states: "*The Pharisees went out and conspired against him, how to destroy him.*" John 5:18 records an event only a few weeks later, where Jesus healed and forgave the sins of the crippled man, and the religious leaders responded by "*seeking all the more to kill him, because not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God.*" They did try to kill Jesus. In Luke 4:29-30 we read of an angry crowd, who "*rose up and drove him out of the town and brought him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they could throw him down the cliff. But passing through their midst, he went away.*" How do you protect yourself in the midst of a crowd that wants to kill you? If you are Jesus, you sovereignly walk through the crowd.

"*But they said, 'Not during the feast, lest there be an uproar among the people.'*" It does seem like the religious leaders may have remembered their failures before. This time they are more strategic. They knew the people would be a problem, so they wanted to wait until after the Passover was over. It would have to wait until things calmed down and most of those who had shouted, "*Hosanna to the Son of David; Blessed is He who comes in the Name of the Lord, Hosanna in the highest,*" would have left and gone home. But they did not have the power to determine when Jesus would die, even though the murder would be done by their own hands. *They said* - that Jesus' death would now have to wait until after the festival - *but God said* that Jesus would die on the most important day of the Passover itself. The *what* and *how* and *when* of Jesus' arrest, betrayal and crucifixion was under his sovereign control.

Now when Jesus was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, a woman came up to him with an alabaster flask of very expensive ointment, and she poured it on his head as he reclined at table.

Matthew 26:6-7

Matthew now takes us to an event in the town of Bethany that is recorded in all four gospels. The event is a meal - a "feast" - in the home of Simon the leper, who had been healed by Jesus. The whole of the gospels indicates that there were at least seventeen people at this dinner: Simon, Mary, Martha, Lazarus, Jesus, and the twelve Apostles. True to her character as the "doer" in the family, Martha did all of the serving. Only in John's gospel do we find out that the woman who anointed Jesus was Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus - and it's also there we read that Mary did this because she was deeply grateful to Jesus for raising her brother Lazarus from the dead. Mary is found only three times in the Gospels, and in each instance, she is at the feet of Jesus. She sat at Jesus' feet and listened to his teaching (Luke 10:38-42); she came to his feet in sorrow after the death of Lazarus (John 11:28-32); and she worshiped at his feet when she anointed Him with the ointment (Matthew 26:7; John 12:1-3).

A closer look at this gives a greater and deeper understanding of what Mary was really doing here. In John 1:3 we read that *“Mary . . . took a pound of expensive ointment made from pure nard and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped his feet with her hair.”* Nard is an aromatic herb grown in the high pasture-land of the Himalayas, between Tibet and India. Harvesting this plant in such a remote location, processing it and then transporting it to Israel would have made this an extremely precious perfume. The value of it is expressed as well in Matthew in that he points out that it was in an alabaster jar, which in itself would have been expensive. In John 12:5 we read that Judas asked: *“Why was this ointment not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?”* A denarius was the common wage for a full day’s labor, which means the nard was worth what the average laboring man would have earned in a full year. To give some perspective, a worker who makes just \$10 per hour earns \$24,000 in 300 days of labor.

Some have said this shows us that Lazarus, Martha and Mary were pretty well off financially. Well that may have been true, but we don’t know that. Perhaps they sold everything they had to buy the expensive container of nard, but we don’t know that either. Either way, it doesn’t diminish in any way the value of this perfumed ointment. Mary’s actions were an expression of her love and gratitude for Jesus bringing her brother back to life. What Mary does is remarkable. Matthew and Mark give an account of her actions with each one stressing slightly different aspects of what she did and they both point out that the perfume was in an alabaster jar. Mark remarks that she broke the jar and poured the perfume on Jesus’ head. It is John who points out the amount of perfume which was so much that she also anointed Jesus’ feet with it to such an extent that she needed to wipe off the excess, which she did with her hair. No wonder the house was filled with the fragrance of this perfume.

The significance of what Mary did is somewhat lost to us because we live in a different climate and culture. Our culture has high standards of hygiene, and our climate has an abundance of water, allowing people to bathe frequently. In that culture, with a limited water supply, bathing the whole body was not very frequent. Add in the fact that they had to walk everywhere in a fairly warm climate, and it is easy to see that people might not smell very pleasant. Perfumes helped, but they were expensive and so anointing someone with perfumed ointment was a gracious and kind act. It was also the common custom to wash a guest’s feet. They would be dirty from walking the dusty roads in sandals. Anointing the feet would be exceptional. But consider as well that Mary wiped up the excess perfume with her hair. In that culture it would also have been an impropriety for Mary to loosen her hair in the presence of men, much less use it to wipe a man’s feet. But Mary is not concerned with what other people think. She is only concerned about giving of herself to Jesus. She loves Jesus and she humbly and sacrificially and extravagantly gives to him her best as a demonstration of her love.

And when the disciples saw it, they were indignant, saying, “Why this waste? For this could have been sold for a large sum and given to the poor.” But Jesus, aware of this, said to them, “Why do you trouble the woman? For she has done a beautiful thing to me. For you always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me. In pouring this ointment on my body, she has done it to prepare me for burial. Truly, I say to you, wherever this gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will also be told in memory of her.” Matthew 26:8-13

Mary’s humble demonstration of extravagant, sacrificial love does not go over well with Jesus’ disciples. Matthew tell us those in the room were pretty angry about what she did. *“Why this waste?”* they asked. John’s gospel tells us that it was Judas who indignantly suggested they should have sold the nard and *“given it to the poor.”* It seems as if they had realized what she was about to do, they would have tried to physically stop her. But Jesus would have no part this. Instead of chastising Mary, Jesus rebuked those who were indignant by saying: *“Why do you trouble the woman? For she has done a beautiful thing to me. For you always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me. In pouring this ointment on my body, she has done it to prepare me for burial.” Truly, I say to you, wherever this gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will also be told in memory of her.”*

Jesus defends what Mary had done to him. It was not a “waste” but a “beautiful thing.” Mary’s actions on that day exposed the depth to which she treasured Jesus. She took the opportunity to act in the most remarkable moment in history. Mary believed what Jesus had said, that in just a few days time, Jesus would serve as the Passover sacrifice. She believed that Jesus the Son of God in human flesh – and that he was about to bear her sin and die on her behalf. And Mary said “yes” in advance to that sacrifice -by taking what was most physically and extravagantly precious to her, and anointing him for burial with it while he was still in her presence. And Jesus graciously approved of her expression of love.

Those who looked on what Mary did, said that it was a waste. They said they were more concerned for the poor. But Jesus said, “*You always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me.*” The truth is, if they really wanted to help the poor, they could do so later. But while Jesus was with Mary, she was determined to express her love to him with the whole of her being. While those there didn’t get that, Jesus made the meaning and significance of her actions clear to all: “*In pouring this ointment on my body, she has done it to prepare me for burial.*” Mary’s anointing revealed that she believed Jesus was about to die as her Passover Lamb; and that she fully accepted his death for her as her Savior. And Jesus’ words regarding the humble extravagance of Mary’s sacrificial anointing was also an amazing commendation to Mary, when he said: *Truly, I say to you, wherever this gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will also be told in memory of her.*” This is the *gospel* that we are reading today.

Jesus called Mary’s anointing the “*gospel*” because Jesus was holding up to us what Mary did - as an example of the sort of response to his sacrifice that truly pleases Him. Mary truly believed what Jesus said. She trusted in his promises, and she was so grateful for what he was about to do for her *and she treasured him for it.* What Mary did was an act of humble worship of self-sacrifice in presenting an extravagant precious gift to Jesus. This is the “*gospel.*” *When we truly treasure Jesus' sacrifice for us on the cross, we will humbly and sacrificially give ourselves to Jesus in return, in ways that will please Jesus.*

What is your response to Jesus' sacrifice on the cross for you? What is our response to Jesus' sacrifice on the cross for us? This question is like our question from last week, that asked: “*What do we have to do to get to heaven?*” Both answers proclaim the truth that there is much more to the gospel than just being saved from the condemnation of our sins – because a true, real, genuine salvation will explode with God-glorifying, Christ-centered, Holy Spirit-empowered reactions and responses of love and joy and gratefulness and mercy and grace and commitment and compassion and humility and sacrifice. Last week Jesus declared that our response to the gospel should be to love and care for each other and especially for those who are seen as *the least of us on earth.* This week Jesus declares that our response to the gospel should be to humbly and sacrificially give ourselves to Jesus, as Jesus sacrificed himself for us on the cross, in ways that will please Jesus, because we truly treasure Jesus. Amen?

Then one of the twelve, whose name was Judas Iscariot, went to the chief priests and said, “What will you give me if I deliver him over to you?” And they paid him thirty pieces of silver. And from that moment he sought an opportunity to betray him. Matthew 26:14-16

Here God’s Word tells us that there are some who claim Christ, but they do not treasure him. One wonders if the disciples ever knew the true character of Judas. His criticism of Mary in our text for today sounded so “spiritual” that they joined him in attacking her. But in John 12:6 we know the real reason Judas wanted the ointment sold: the money would go into the treasury and he would be able to use it. Judas is a tragic figure. He was called to be one of Christ’s disciples and was named an apostle along with the others. Like the others, Judas even received power to heal. But in spite of his affiliation with the disciples and his association with Jesus, Judas was not a true believer. When Jesus washed the disciples’ feet, he made it clear that Judas was not cleansed (John 13:10–11). While we can never fully understand the mind and heart of Judas, we do know that he had every opportunity to be saved.

Perhaps it was, in part, that Judas was upset with what he considered to be the "wastefulness" of Mary. Or it could be, in part, because he was growing more and more disappointed with Jesus. Judas was probably like many - expecting a mighty, conquering Messiah; but Jesus kept disappointing those expectations with all His talk about being handed over and crucified. Judas despised the sacrifice that Jesus was about to make - so much so, in fact, that he sought to get what he could out of it while he had the chance. He went to the chief priests and asked, "*What will you give me if I deliver him over to you?*" They weighed out thirty pieces of silver to him; and from then on, he sought to "*betray*" Jesus. Old Testament law deemed thirty pieces of silver was the price of a common slave (Exodus 21:32). It was a far cry from the great extravagance Mary had just poured out upon Jesus. That's how blind Judas was to the sacrifice Jesus was about to make. That's what a low value he placed on the Savior's love. Judas' life is a warning to those who claim and serve Christ but whose hearts are far from God. Judas is also a warning to those who waste their opportunities and their lives. "*Why this waste?*" asked Judas when he saw that expensive ointment poured out on Jesus. Yet Judas wasted his opportunities, his life, and his soul. In John 17:12 Jesus called Judas the *son of perdition* - which literally means "son of waste."

What is Jesus' death on the cross worth to you? What is Jesus death on the cross worth to us? How much of our hearts and lives and possessions are you and I and we willing to give to Jesus in response to what he has sacrificed for us? Would Jesus consider what we are doing for him a "*waste*" or "*a beautiful thing*"? John Henry Jowett once said: "Ministry that costs nothing, accomplishes nothing."

Jesus said: "*If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it. For what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses or forfeits himself?*" (Luke 9:23-25). Jesus also said: "*Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. If anyone serves me, he must follow me; and where I am, there will my servant be also. If anyone serves me, the Father will honor him*" (John 12:24-26).

Boarding the SS Dorchester on a dreary winter day in 1943 were 903 soldiers and four chaplains, including Moody Bible Institute alumnus Lt. George Fox. World War II was in full swing, and the ship was headed across the icy North Atlantic where German U-boats lurked. At 12:00 on the morning of February 3, a German torpedo ripped into the ship. "She's going down!" the men cried, scrambling for lifeboats. A young GI crept up to one of the chaplains. "I've lost my life jacket," he said. "Take mine," the chaplain said, handing the soldier his jacket. Before the ship sank, each of the other chaplains gave his life jacket to another man. The four chaplains then linked arms together and lifted their voices in prayer as the SS Dorchester went down to the bottom of the sea. Lt. Fox and his fellow pastors were awarded posthumously the Distinguished Service Cross. When we truly treasure Jesus' sacrifice for us on the cross, we will humbly and sacrificially give ourselves to Jesus in return, in ways that will please Jesus. "*Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.*"

The pioneer Christian missionary David Livingstone once said: "People talk of the sacrifice I have made in spending so much of my life in Africa. Can that be called a sacrifice which is simply acknowledging a great debt we owe to our God, which we can never repay? Is that a sacrifice which brings its own reward in healthful activity, the consciousness of doing good, peace of mind, and a bright hope of a glorious destiny? It is emphatically no sacrifice. Rather it is a privilege. Anxiety, sickness, suffering, danger, foregoing the common conveniences of this life - these may make us pause, and cause the spirit to waver, and the soul to sink; but let this only be for a moment. All these are nothing compared with the glory which shall later be revealed in and through us. I never made a sacrifice. Of this we ought not to talk, when we remember the great sacrifice which He made who left His Father's throne on high to give Himself for us." And all God's people said: "Amen!"