

A Beautiful Thing Worth Telling the Whole World

The Sweetness of Worship & Sickness of Greed

Scripture: Matthew 26:1-16

Sermon Series: Matthew

Topic: Jesus, Anointing, Worship, Greed

I. Introduction

This portion of Scripture is about a choice that each of us at one point in our lives will have to make. It centers on the what we will choose to worship. Will we choose to worship a crucified Son sent from heaven, or will we worship the wealth of the world? What would you prefer to have most, Jesus or all the wealth of the world? What will you seek first; money or Messiah?

Matthew lays before us two primary characters, an unnamed woman who worships Jesus more than all her money and a man named Judas who prefers money more than the Messiah.

There are four scenes in this passage. In the first, we'll see *the plan of God*. In the second, we'll see *the plotting of man*. In the third, we will see *the worship of a women*. In the fourth, we'll see *the wickedness of a betrayer*. Scene one takes place on the mount of Olives. Scene two is in Jerusalem in the palace of the high priest. Scene three is in Bethany in the home of Simon the Leper. Scene four is back in Jerusalem in a secret meeting among co-conspirators.

The heart of this passage is what we might call "*a beautiful thing worth telling the whole world.*" It took place during dinner in the home of Simon the leper. During dinner a woman anointed Jesus with a very expensive ointment. All four gospel authors record an anointing of Jesus. However, Matthew, Mark, and John all write of the same event, while Luke writes of a different and earlier event at a different location (in Galilee), involving a different women (a sinner), and a different



host (Simon the Pharisee). The event before us this morning was also recorded by Mark (14:3-9) and by John (12:1-8).

Scene I: The Plan of God (vs. 1-2)

The first scene serves as the introduction. The primary point is that this is *the plan of God*. It opens with Jesus still sitting with his disciples on the Mt. Olivet as he has been teaching them.

Matthew 26:1-2 (ESV) ¹ When Jesus had finished all these sayings, he said to his disciples, ² "You know that after two days the Passover is coming, and the Son of Man will be delivered up to be crucified."

When Jesus finished all these sayings. This is now the end of Jesus' teaching with his disciples. This teaching on Mt. Olivet completes the fifth and final of Jesus' great discourses in this gospel. A significant chapter is now closed and something hard and difficult is about to begin. Jesus aims to prepare his disciples, once again, for the most significant challenge to their faith in him.

You know that after two days the Passover is coming. "After Two days" places this on the late evening of Tuesday of Holy Week. It's been a long day. We have been four months in covering all that Jesus did and taught on this day. **Passover** is the annual feast of the Jews which commemorates the deliverance of the entire nation of Israel out of slavery in Egypt and into a new covenant relationship with God made at Mt. Sinai. Passover reminds God's people that God intends to dwell with those who love and obey him. Passover is an annual reminder of God's great love for his covenant people. Passover recalls to mind the greatest act of salvation which God had yet accomplished in all the earth. Passover demonstrated that Yahweh is the greatest God among all gods. Passover reminds the world that God controls life and death. Passover is the largest corporate worship event on the Jewish calendar. The first century historian Josephus tells us that more than two million people gathered in Jerusalem to celebrate Passover.¹

And the Son of Man will be delivered up to be crucified. As we have seen many times before, when Jesus uses the phrase "*the Son of Man*," he is referring to himself. Matthew records Jesus using this self-designation 30 times in this gospel. "*Will be delivered up to be crucified*," is now the fifth explicit² and second implicit³ prediction of his death and subsequent resurrection during this upcoming Passover. Now for a total of seven times Jesus has made reference to the fact that at Passover he will be arrested, crucified, will die, and then on the third day be resurrected from the dead. Jesus wants his disciples to have no doubt that what will happen at Passover will be directly connected to his predicted death by crucifixion.

¹ Flavius Josephus and William Whiston, *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1987), 749.

² Matthew 16:21; 17:9, 23; 20:18-19.

³ Matthew 20:28; 21:37-44.

You will notice that this is not a question. It is a declaration of fact. Jesus is stating a fact that he expects that his disciples to know. The reason Jesus states as a fact that the disciples know what is going to happen in two days is because he has repeatedly told them what would happen to him in Jerusalem when he arrived to celebrate Passover. Jesus can state this fact about the future because he has six times previously told them what would happen in the future, at this specific Passover celebration. Now he is telling them again for the seventh time.

If someone five times directly and two times indirectly warned you that something terrible was about to happen in two days, what would you think? You'd think that there some sort of plan in place. You'd think this thing was something this person willed to happen. You'd think that person wanted you know this for some reason. You'd think this person was forcing you to think about whether or not he was telling the truth. You'd also be forced to consider the power of this person if this thing would actually happen as it had been predicted. ***Jesus is unquestioning clear; his arrest, crucifixion, death, and resurrection on the third day after his burial is all part of God's great and gracious plan.*** The crucifixion of Jesus will not be an accident. It will be revealed to be part of God's great plan.

Scene II: The Plot of Man (vs.3-5)

In this second scene Matthew takes us away from the beauty of Mt. Olivet and back across the Kidron valley through the gates of Jerusalem and into the city to a secret meeting inside the palace of the high priest where he and the elders of Israel have gathered to privately plot an assassination.

Matthew 26:3-5 (ESV) ³ Then the chief priests and the elders of the people gathered in the palace of the high priest, whose name was Caiaphas, ⁴ and plotted together in order to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him. ⁵ But they said, "Not during the feast, lest there be an uproar among the people."

Gathered in the palace of the high priest, whose name was Caiaphas. While Jesus was teaching his disciples about his second coming and the final judgment, the Jewish religious leaders had gathered together and judged Jesus as worthy of death.

Caiaphas was the son-in-law of Annas, who was deposed as high priest by Rome in A.D. 15, when Caiaphas was installed.⁴ According to Mosaic law the high priest served until death, thus from the perspective of the Levitical law Annas would remain high priest until he died, but since legally Caiaphas was high priest, in effect they both served simultaneously (see Lk 3:2). Caiaphas outlived Annas and died in A.D. 36.

This **gathering at his palace** is an unofficial meeting of the influential minds in order to decide what to do with Jesus, who had become unbearable to them. This was not an official meeting, for if it was the entire Sanhedrin would have been formally called together. But this is

⁴ D. A. Carson, "Matthew," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein, vol. 8 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984), 524.

obviously not the case since no Pharisees are invited, but rather only “the chief priests and the elders” of the people.

Plotted together in order to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him. This secret meeting was unofficial because they were “*plotting to kill*” Jesus. The purpose of this meeting was murderous. They wanted to manipulate the “*arrest of Jesus by stealth*.” They were too conscientious to murder Jesus in public, so they had to “*plot together*” how to entangle Jesus in some private controversy by *stealth*. But note their aim. What wanted nothing less than to “*kill him*.” Their corporate aim is to bring about the end of Jesus’ life.

Not during the feast, lest there be an uproar among the people. The reason for the “stealth” is to avoid a riot among the people. Jesus is immensely popular among the people, thus he cannot be arrested openly. The crowds have gathered for the Passover, thus their plan is to wait until *after* the Passover. The Passover celebration was only one night, but The Feast of Unleavened Bread immediately followed Passover and lasted seven days. The two memorials were so closely tied together that in the minds of many Jews they were simply two different steps in one holy convocation. The important point to see here is that this assassination plot is agreed to be delayed until after the end of the feast. And so ends scene II and the malicious plotting of malevolent men.

Scene III: The Worship of a Woman (vs.6-13)

The third scene takes us out of the palace of the high priest inside the city of Jerusalem and into the town of Bethany and inside the home of Simon the leper where a small crowd has gathered to host a meal in honor of Jesus. We transition from a small gathering of religious elite in Jerusalem plotting Jesus’ death, to a small gathering of unnamed disciples in Bethany who have gathered to honor Jesus’ life.

Matthew 26:6-13 (ESV) ⁶ Now when Jesus was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, ⁷ 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. ⁸ And when the disciples saw it, they were indignant, saying, “Why this waste? ⁹ For this could have been sold for a large sum and given to the poor.” ¹⁰ But Jesus, aware of this, said to them, “Why do you trouble the woman? For she has done a beautiful thing to me. ¹¹ For you always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me. ¹² In pouring this ointment on my body, she has done it to prepare me for burial. ¹³ 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.”

Now when Jesus was at Bethany at the house of Simon the leper (v.6). Matthew now takes us to a time “*When Jesus was at Bethany*.” Bethany has traditionally been located about a mile east of Jerusalem on the southeast slope of the Mount of Olives. Jesus lodged here each night of Holy Week (Mt 21:17). Bethany was the hometown of Lazarus and his sisters Mary and

Martha (Jn 11:1). Most scholars assume that Jesus stayed with them during this final week leading up to his crucifixion.

That Jesus was in the "*house of Simon the leper*" means that Jesus had healed this man, thus he was *formerly* a leper. No one who was currently a leper would have been able to host people in his home without causing them to be ceremonially unclean and run the risk of infecting the as well.

John tells us that this occasion was a *dinner* held in honor of Jesus and that Lazarus, Martha, and Mary were among those in attendance (Jn 12:2). John also tells us that this dinner actually took place six days before Passover (Jn 12:1). Matthew arranged his material to contrast the hatred of Jesus by the Jewish leaders over against the love of Jesus by his disciples and those whom he had healed.

A woman came up to him (v.7). Neither Matthew nor Mark name this woman, however John does (Jn 12:2). This woman was Mary, the sister of Lazarus and Martha. This is the same Mary about whom Martha complained to Jesus that she was wrong for preferring to sit at his feet and listen to his teaching rather than help set the table and serve the meal (Lk 10:38-42).

An alabaster flask of very expensive ointment(v.7). Many of these *flasks* (see photo⁵) have been discovered in archeological digs. They were used as perfume bottles, medicinal vials, or as storage for other valuable oils, ointments, and perfumes. They were sealed to avoid leakage and could be uncorked when used.

This "*very expensive ointment*," we are told by both Mark and John, was made of "*pure nard*,"⁶ or "*spikenard*, an extremely expensive luxury imported from India, used especially for anointing the dead."⁷ Both Mark and John value the ointment at "*three hundred denarii*" (Mk 14:5; Jn 12:5). A single denarii was what the average laborer earned in one day. Thus, this ointment was worth about 300 days wages. The Massachusetts minimum wage is currently \$15.00 per hour. At 12 hours⁸ per day, a daily rate would be \$180. If we multiply \$180 by 300 then we arrive at a sum of \$54,000. Indeed that is "*very expensive ointment*."



There is much speculation for how they came by this ointment. As previously noted, this ointment was used for "anointing the dead." Perhaps she ordered it for Lazarus and maybe by the time it arrived it was no longer needed because Jesus had raised him from the dead. It really does not matter why or how she had it, the fact is that she had an ointment that was worth a year's wages and she chose to use it on Jesus.

⁵ Source: <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/242003> accessed 2 August 2025.

⁶ Mark 14:3; John 12:3.

⁷ R. T. France, *Matthew: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 1, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 366.

⁸ Matthew 20:6-9.

She poured it on his head as he reclined at table (v.7). Mary *poured* this ointment on the *head* of Jesus while *"he reclined at table."* Evidently she interrupted the meal in doing this. Everyone saw this. Mary felt that what she was doing was important enough to break the flow of the evening and pour this perfume on Jesus' head.

John adds that she also *"anointed the feet of Jesus"* and then *"wiped his feet with her hair"* (Jn 12:3). Evidently there was enough of this ointment to anoint Jesus from head to toe. John tells us this was a '*litra*,' which was a Roman pound, that amounted to 11.5 ounces.⁹ John also adds, *"the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume"* (Jn 12:3).

This is a scene of extravagant devotion to Jesus. There is nothing inappropriate here since Mary is hiding nothing. She simply senses that this is the right thing to do. This is nothing less than pure love being poured out on Jesus. She has just anointed Jesus from head to toe with a perfume that cost a year's wages and then she wiped up the excess ointment with her own hair, which almost certainly points to this being a spontaneous act of devotion, reverence, and worship. Honored guests were anointed, kings were anointed, and messiah means 'the anointed one.' Maybe Mary thought of Jesus one who fit easily into each of these categories. She obviously took no thought to get a towel to wipe up the excess oil, and so she had to use her hair, the only thing presently at hand to catch the overflowing perfume. Mary simply could not contain her delight in and devotion to Jesus and so *"she has done what she could"* (Mk 14:8) did in moment of spontaneous worship.

When the disciples saw it, they were indignant, saying, Why this waste? (v. 8). Matthew indicates, *"when the **disciples**,"* plural, saw it, *"they were indignant,"* meaning there was more than one disciple who disliked what they were seeing. However, John tells us that Judas was the disciple who verbally objected (Jn 12:4). What he saw made him *"indignant."* This is a strong word that means he was **very angry** and greatly displeased.¹⁰ Judas is the one who was most acutely angered by what he was witnessing. In his eyes, Mary's show of affection and devotion was nothing more than *"waste."* In the eyes of Judas, nothing of any value had transpired before him. This extravagance was a pointless waste worthy of being rebuked.

This could have been sold for a large sum and given to the poor (v.9). The stated reason for the anger is that this perfume could have been sold on eBay for *"a large sum of money"* which could then have been *"given to the poor."* Thus, the anger appears to be righteous. The great displeasure of Judas apparently stems from a very valid concern for the poor. However, in John's account of this event, he provides a very necessary piece of information about Judas.

John 12:6 (ESV) He said this, not because he cared about the poor, but because he because he was a thief, and having charge of the moneybag he used to help himself to what was put into it.

⁹ See ESV footnote at John 12:3.

¹⁰ Rick Brannan, ed., *Lexham Research Lexicon of the Septuagint*, Lexham Research Lexicons (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2020).

Evil often hides behind righteousness. The stated reason is not the deepest reason. Feigned concern for the poor was why Judas said he was angry, but the deepest reason was that the greed in his heart was enflamed at lost opportunity for personal profit. Jesus will not allow this go unaddressed.

But Jesus, aware of this, said to them, "Why do you trouble the woman? She has done a beautiful thing to me" (v.10). Apparently Judas did not intend for his words to be heard by everyone at the table, or maybe he only spoke to the other disciples sitting close to him, but Jesus was **aware** of his words. Evidently Judas' remarks "**troubled**" Mary. Perhaps in that moment she began to second guess what she had done. Maybe this was waste. Maybe she should not have done this. It is true, it could have been sold and fed the poor for a long while. All these conflicting thoughts troubled her. But Jesus won't have this, for "**she has done a beautiful thing.**" This spontaneous act of devotion and worship is beautiful. What she has done is commendable and Jesus will not allow her to be criticized for this act of worship. Jesus defends Mary and rebukes Judas.

For you always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me (v.11). Judas, you can do good to the poor whenever you like. Nothing is preventing you from helping the poor. The poor will always be close by¹¹, but I will not always be close by. "**You will not always have me.**" Once again, the reality of what is about to unfold at Passover is at the forefront of Jesus' mind. He knows that he will soon be arrested and crucified. His impending death is close at hand.

In pouring this ointment on my body, she has done it to prepare me for burial (v.12). Is Jesus here stating that Mary is doing better than she knows? Is Jesus looking forward to his conviction as a criminal knowing that the circumstances of his crucifixion and burial will prevent the customary anointing of Jewish corpses and is he revealing the prophetic implications of what Mary is doing? Or is he saying that Mary has an idea that Jesus is about to be killed and buried? It is certainly conceivable since Jesus has multiple times announced what would befall him at Passover. Perhaps Mary has truly been listening to Jesus as he has five times spoken of his arrest, crucifixion, death that would take place at Passover. We don't know exactly. It could be either, but this is a beautiful thing that Mary has done and Jesus will not allow this to be forgotten.

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 (v.13). Worshiping Jesus is worth talking about. Honoring Jesus is worth discussing. Jesus was certainly right about this. We are here talking about this today and so his prophecy has proved true. This singular act of devotion, this costly work of worship, is still being spoken of more than two thousand years later. This beautiful thing that Mary did is worthy of being told around the world. Just as **this gospel** will be **proclaimed in the whole world**, so also will this beautiful work of worship be proclaimed in the whole world. Jesus

¹¹ Deuteronomy 15:11.

is a person worthy of the deepest and most sincere acts of worship and such things are worthy of being spoken of around the world.

Scene IV: The Wickedness of a Betrayer (vs.14-16)

Now we turn to the final scene in this portion of Scripture. We return to Jerusalem to another secret meeting. Here we see the wickedness of a betrayer. In this scene we hear Judas' poisonous promise to betray Jesus.

Matthew 26:14-16 (ESV) ¹⁴ Then one of the twelve, whose name was Judas Iscariot, went to the chief priests ¹⁵ and said, "What will you give me if I deliver him over to you?" And they paid him thirty pieces of silver. ¹⁶ And from that moment he sought an opportunity to betray him.

One of the Twelve (v.14). Matthew reminds his readers who it is who is about to betray Jesus. It is "*one of the twelve*." It is none less than one of Jesus' closest friends. It is one of those who ought to be supporting Jesus the most who will now betray him most cruelly.

Judas Iscariot, went to the chief priests (v.14). Judas was so greedy and so angry that he went to those whom he knew were seeking to destroy Jesus. He just lost access to \$54k so in his anger he will seek some financial gain. His love of money will lead him into the betrayal of the one person in all the earth who is least worthy of being betrayed. Matthew intends to expose the greed in Judas' heart to be exposed. If Judas cannot get his hands on the large amount that could have been brought in from the sale of the perfume, then he will certainly get his hands on whatever amount of money can be brought in from the sale of Jesus himself.

What will you give me if I deliver him over to you? (v.15). This reveals the deepest desire in the heart of Judas is to get money. He wants as much as he can get for betraying Jesus. His primary motivation is money.

They paid him thirty pieces of silver (v.15). The exact amount is hard to determine since all money a denarius and above was minted in silver. It most likely weighed out in shekels which one shekel equaled four denarii. Most likely it was the shekel, which would have amounted to about four month's wages, or—if we use the same amounts as we did in relation to the perfume—about \$21,600 in today's currency. That's not a small sum, but infinitesimally small in comparison of the truth worthy of Jesus. It is only slightly more than one third the amount that Mary expended.

And from that moment he sought an opportunity to betray him (v.16). The agreement has now been made. The amount has been agreed upon. The deal is set in motion. The sovereign plan of the Father and Son are beginning to unfold through the treachery and betrayal of a greedy friend.

Conclusion

In conclusion, let's consider a couple of observations.

1. ***The crucifixion of Jesus was planned by God.*** Jesus knew exactly what he was doing. The betrayal, arrest, crucifixion, death, and resurrection was all planned by God "from before the foundation of the world." Jesus repeatedly told his disciples what would happen when he arrived in Jerusalem for this final Passover celebration so that they would know this was planned. Evil did not triumph in the death of Jesus. Righteousness triumphed. God triumphed and Jesus has now been exalted to the right hand of God the Father. All of this was planned by God the Father and his glorious Son.
2. ***Unashamed, public love for and devotion to Jesus is a beautiful thing worthy of being seen by the whole world.*** The people of Jesus should never be ashamed of publicly showing the world their love for and devotion to their Savior. Jesus said it well, "Everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven" (Mt 10:32). If we are unashamed of claiming to belong to Jesus here on earth, then one day in heaven Jesus will not be ashamed claiming that we belong to him.
3. ***Loving money more than Jesus will result in the loss of your soul.*** We are a wealthy people. We live in a wealthy country. We live in a land of opportunity and almost everyone one around us worships wealth far more than Jesus. We must be on guard against greed. What do you spend more time doing; seeking to advance your wealth or seeking to advance the kingdom of Jesus? Money is not evil, but if you love money more than you love Jesus, then you will lose your soul. Judas lost his soul.

Discussion Questions

1. What were the four scenes in this portion of Scripture (Mt 26:1-16)?
2. Which scene is most memorable to you? Why?
3. Why would the chief priests and elders have wanted to avoid arresting Jesus among the crowds of people?
4. How many people did the first century Jewish historian Josephus estimate had gathered in Jerusalem to celebrate Passover?
5. What is the celebration of Passover? How would you summarize it to a friend or coworker?

6. Why do you think Jesus described being anointed by Mary as her having “done a beautiful thing to me?” What was beautiful about it?
7. Do you think Mary had a sense that Jesus was about to die? Why or why not?
8. According to the way Matthew structured this portion of Scripture, for what reason did Judas betray Jesus? What does Matthew want his readers to conclude about the motivation of Judas’ heart?
9. What main point of this passage of Scripture?
10. What is one truth that you want to take away from this text?