

*A Beautiful Thing*  
January 31, 2021  
Matthew 26:1-16 (Pew Bible, 831)

A sermon preached by Dr. John Clayton at Covenant Presbyterian Church of Fort Smith, Arkansas on January 31, 2021.

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).<sup>1</sup>

Having concluded his prophecy of things to come at the end of the age, Jesus returns to the immediate, the annual feast of Passover. As God established it, Passover was kept as “a memorial day” a feast to remember Israel’s redemption from Egyptian slavery, a statute to be obeyed forever (Ex. 12:14). As recorded in Exodus, the Passover meal centered on a slaughtered lamb without blemish whose blood served as Israel’s salvation from death (Ex. 12:3-13). Every child of Israel knew the importance of the feast and its significance, but now Jesus correlates it with his death: “You know that after two days the Passover is coming, and the Son of Man will be delivered up to be crucified.” It is not merely a statement of time. It is both subtle and significant: As the Passover lamb is to be slaughtered, so the lamb of God is to be sacrificed.

What Jesus foretells carries a dual meaning, so to speak. As “God, from all eternity, did, by the most wise and holy counsel of his own will, freely, and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass,”<sup>2</sup> Jesus is to be delivered up to be crucified. Yet so, as God is not “the author of sin,”<sup>3</sup> through the means of Judas’ betrayal and the evil intent and works of the leaders of Israel, Jesus is to be delivered to be crucified. Both are true statements but from two different perspectives. As Peter explained after Jesus’ resurrection and ascension, he was “delivered up to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God...[and] crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men” (Acts 2:22-23). Returning to Jesus’ prophetic words to his disciples, Matthew shows us how God’s

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<sup>1</sup> Unless referenced otherwise, all Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2001).

<sup>2</sup> The Westminster Confession of Faith 3.1.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

definite plan begins to unfold, through the hands of lawless men in the secret plot to arrest and kill Jesus.

### **The Plot**

A consortium of Israel's leaders assemble at the private residence of the high priest, Caiaphas. Ironically, those charged with leading Israel, assemble to unknowingly destroy it. As with any secret plot, timing is everything. They must take advantage of Jesus' visit to Jerusalem and arrest him before he departs. But, it is not Jesus' presence that presents a problem; it is the people. Jesus' popularity presented a problem. They must avoid the light and act in darkness.

The Prophet Micah warned, "Woe to those who devise wickedness and work evil on their beds! When the morning dawns, they perform it, because it is in the power of their hand" (Micah 2:1). As God ordained, power was in the hand of Israel's leaders, and with that power they plotted murder. We are told in the Gospel of John that the plot to kill Jesus was a matter of expediency. Jesus threatened the popular party and the peace of a nation. But it was the ironic words of Caiaphas that convinced the leaders: "it is better for you that one man should die for the people, not that the whole nation should perish" (John 11:51).

But as evil and ugly as the secret plot to arrest and kill Jesus was, down the road in Bethany Matthew records the opposite, a beautiful encounter in the home of Simon the leper. Simon, whose name likely tells of his healing, now serves as host. If this account differs from John's recounting of Mary anointing Jesus' feet, as I think it does, then it is in Simon's home that an unidentified woman is introduced, remembered not for who she is but what she does. While Israel's leaders plot to destroy Jesus, this woman purposely worships him.

### **The Purpose**

Perhaps interrupting a meal, the woman approaches Jesus "with an alabaster flask of very expensive ointment." Mark reveals it to be "pure nard" (Mark 14:3), or "spikenard," a fragrant essential oil derived from the roots of an Indian plant similar to valerian. In India it is used to perfume the hair,<sup>4</sup> which is where the woman applies it, pouring it over Jesus' head. The fragrance would have filled the air. In Mark's account, the market value of the nard is estimated at "three hundred denarii (Mark 14:5), the equivalent of 300 days of work. She willingly sacrificed what she has for the sake of honoring her Lord. Would that we would be so willing.

In biblical history, the most common application of oil on the body was for the purpose of anointing, such as Samuel's anointing of young David as king or Moses anointing Aaron as priest. Here an unknown woman unknowingly anoints Jesus as both. She comes not with the authority of a prophet but in the humility of a servant, revealing both her faith in and love for Jesus.

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<sup>4</sup> J.D. Douglas, ed., *The New Bible Dictionary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1962), 1210.

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There are three things that I want us to consider in the humble actions of this woman, three things for us to learn from her: her *priorities* in life, her *praise* of Jesus, and her *preparation* of him for burial. First, consider her priorities. Her actions reveal that her faith in and love for Jesus transcend any cultural barriers. She boldly approaches him when he is “reclining at table” (Mark 14:3). A woman approaching a man in this posture and setting was not culturally acceptable. Though uninvited, she draws close enough to pour oil upon Jesus’ head saturating his hair, publicly revealing her sacrifice of praise. Of course, we don’t know what she was thinking, but perhaps she could have echoed what David said to Michal, “It was before the LORD! I was celebrating before the LORD...[and] I am willing to shame and humiliate myself even more than this” (2 Sam. 6:21-22 NET). Worship of our Lord transcends time and locale. Regardless of what our culture says, there is no shame in celebrating the Lord Jesus Christ.

We also see her priorities in the value and application of the oil. At the equivalent of almost a year’s worth of wages, her gift is gracious, irreversible, and extravagant. In fact, it is so extravagant that the disciples are indignant, considering her gracious gift to be wasteful: They say, “this could have been sold for a large sum and given to the poor.” And undoubtedly it could have, and she surely knew it. But for her, honoring Jesus with her wealth surpasses everything else. The greatest investment you can make is in giving graciously, irreversibly, and extravagantly to the Lord.

As Christians, our priority is to be Christ-centered first. Sadly, we, like Jesus’ first disciples, are too easily distracted by the cares and concerns of the world. Other things captivate our attention and before long Christ becomes less of a priority. Our minds construct our worldview based on what we pay attention to, and what we pay attention to becomes a priority. The Apostle Paul revealed his first priority when he confessed to the Corinthians, “I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Cor. 2:2). Can you confess the same? In watching your actions and listening to your words, what would others say is your first priority?

Second, consider her praise. What she is doing is an act of worship, and it is neither logical nor pragmatic. What first century woman walks into a room full of men reclined at table and pours out a bottle of perfumed oil upon a man’s head? She is someone who is so focused on worshiping Jesus that she is undeterred. In her mind there is nothing greater that she can do with her wealth than to exalt Christ. As Jesus explains to his disciples, “For she has done a beautiful thing to me. For you always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me.”

As Christians, we are indeed called to mercy ministry, to do good to others in need (Gal. 6:10). But is there something greater than doing good? Matthew Henry writes, “There are some opportunities of doing and getting good which are constant, and which we must give constant attendance to the improvement of. Those who have a heart to do good, never need complain for want of opportunity. ...[But] Sometimes special works of piety and devotion should take place of common works of charity.”<sup>5</sup> There is a time for charity, but sometimes the greatest thing we can do is praise the Lord.

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<sup>5</sup> Matthew Henry, *Commentary On the Whole Bible: Genesis to Revelation*, ed. Leslie F. Church (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1961), 1339.

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Third, consider her preparation for Jesus' burial. Surely, she did not know this as her purpose in anointing him, but Jesus reveals what she has done: "In pouring this ointment on my body, she has done it to prepare me for burial. Her ultimate purpose in that moment was preparation. As Jesus prophesied that he would be "delivered up to be crucified," so he receives this woman's extravagant gift as a premonition. What must have seemed morbid to his disciples, Jesus calls "a beautiful thing." It is always a beautiful thing when a child of God uses what he or she has to glorify Christ.

What she has done points to what is to come: the death, burial, and resurrection of our Lord. It is not merely the fragrant oil or offering that is beautiful; it is that the lamb of God will be crucified for the sins of his people. He will be buried, confirming his death. He will be resurrected, confirming his life. And it is through faith in him that we too have life, living it out in love.

Interestingly, it is this woman's humble act of faith and love that Jesus establishes as a memorial. As the gospel is preached this very morning, we are directed by our Lord to look to the example of this woman. For she prepares his body for what awaits him: a cross of suffering, shame, and death; a burial in a borrowed tomb; a resurrection that makes the gospel truly Good News.

We look to this woman in memoriam, unknown to the world but known to Christ. We look to this woman in memoriam as one who had her priorities straight, her praise focused, and Jesus' preparation appointed. I think her life sings out loud:

All for Jesus! All for Jesus!  
All my being's ransomed pow'rs,  
All my thoughts and words and doings,  
All my days and all my hours.

Worldlings prize their gems of beauty,  
Cling to gilded toys of dust,  
Boast of wealth and fame and pleasure;  
Only Jesus will I trust.

Since my eyes were fixed on Jesus,  
I've lost sight of all beside;  
So enchained my spirit's vision,  
Looking at the Crucified.<sup>6</sup>

In contrast to the beauty of this woman's faith and love, Matthew reveals the true nature of one whose name we do know, Judas Iscariot.

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<sup>6</sup> "All for Jesus!" in *Trinity Hymnal*, Revised. (Suwanee, GA: Great Commission Publications, Inc., 1990), 565.

## **The Perfidy**

Jesus' betrayer was not a scribe or Pharisee nor a public spectator or admirer. He was not one of the many who followed Jesus to Jerusalem but one of the twelve. He was among Jesus' closest followers, garnering enough trust to serve as the treasurer and sent out to serve in Jesus' name. But two days before Passover, his true identity is revealed. He who served Christ betrays him. Of course, this came as no surprise to the Son of God, but it did to the other disciples as it does to us. Why would the Lord allow someone into his inner circle who would betray him?

There is no good answer given in Scripture, other than his predestined role as the "son of perdition" (John 17:12 KJV). Perhaps Matthew reveals it here to contrast between what Judas willingly received to betray the Lord and what the woman willingly gave up to worship him. Jesus was betrayed for the paltry price of thirty pieces of silver, roughly equivalent to one month's wages, just enough to pay for a burial plot. The woman poured out her gift, worth almost ten times more than Judas' silver. The difference is telling, not merely of temporal value but eternal. As Jim Elliott said, "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose."<sup>7</sup>

What the woman did was a beautiful thing, as is what we do for Christ's sake through faith and love. When the woman entered that house in Bethany, she had focus and purpose. She had come to worship and honor the Lord. May the same be said of us. Or, as one poet put it, "Only one life, 'twill soon be past, Only what's done for Christ will last."<sup>8</sup> And so her memory lives on, for what she did was a beautiful thing.

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<sup>7</sup> Tim Chester, "Jim Elliot Was No Fool," Crossway, January 8, 2018, <https://www.crossway.org/articles/jim-elliott-was-no-fool/>.

<sup>8</sup> "Quotes of C.T. Studd," WebTruth.org, November 7, 2017, <https://www.webtruth.org/great-quotes/quotes-c-t-studd/>.