

# **M**ATTHEW 26:1-16

## THE EXTRAVAGANCE OF LOVE

*“And it came about that when Jesus had finished all these words, He said to His disciples, ‘You know that after two days the Passover is coming, and the Son of Man is to be delivered up for crucifixion. . . .’” (26:1-16).*

With the beginning of chapter 26, the final major section of Matthew begins. This section is commonly referred to as the “Passion” of Jesus, a term which refers to His betrayal, trial, suffering, and death.

Matthew’s Passion account begins with the grim reminder that Jesus will be crucified during the Passover feast (26:1, 2). He was hated by many, whose goal had become to put Him to death (26:3-5). The opportunity His enemies sought would be supplied by one of His own men, who would sell Him to them for a mere thirty pieces of silver.

Sandwiched between that tale of blind hatred on the one hand and betrayal on the other is a beautiful story of love and tenderness and devotion, the story of Jesus’ anointing by Mary during the supper at Bethany.

Observe first of all the features of this beautiful story:

### THE LOVE

#### The Woman

According to verses 6 and 7, “a woman” came up to Jesus and began to anoint Him. But the parallel account, John 12:3, says that the

woman was none other than Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus. She was Jesus’ long-time friend who had earlier sat at His feet in her home and listened to His teaching while Martha served, and who had looked to Jesus for help when Lazarus had died.<sup>1</sup>

#### The Gift

Matthew describes what Mary poured out on Jesus’ head as “very expensive perfume” from an alabaster flask (26:7). Mark 14:3 further identifies it as “pure nard” (“spikenard”), an expensive luxury item imported from India. Unlike the perfumes of today, nard was usually sealed in bottles to preserve its fragrance, and the bottle had to be broken in order to be used. To *use* the ointment was to *lose* it. There was no using of a little and saving the rest for another occasion. The value of the ointment is described as “a high price” (26:9), but Mark 14:5 is more explicit: “For this perfume might have been sold for over three hundred denarii.” Three hundred denarii would

---

<sup>1</sup>Mary is not to be confused with the unnamed “sinful woman” of Luke 7 who wiped Jesus’ feet with her hair. This incident also took place in the home of a man named “Simon” who was a Pharisee, but the Simon of Matthew is described as “Simon the leper.” France suggests that Simon perhaps had been cured of his leprosy by Jesus, since a leper could not entertain dinner guests, but that his nickname “the leper” had stuck with him. R. T. France, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, ed. Leon Morris (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1985), 362.

be almost a year's wages for a common laborer. Without knowing more about the economic status of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, we could easily surmise that this flask of ointment may have been something of a family heirloom. At any rate, it was an obviously extravagant gift of love.<sup>2</sup>

### The Complaint

Ugliness seems never to be very far from beauty. According to verses 8 and 9, "the disciples" complained about the extravagance of this gift with the query, "Why this *waste*? For this perfume might have been sold for a high price and the money given to the poor." In saying "the disciples," Matthew seems to be speaking generally, for Mark 14:4 says that "some" made this complaint to themselves. But John 12:4 is even more explicit in saying that it was none other than Judas Iscariot who actually voiced the complaint. It seems likely that Judas was the instigator of the complaint and his pettiness influenced the others who were unaware of his motive of greed ("Now he said this, not because he was concerned about the poor, but because he was a thief, and as he had the money box, he used to pilfer what was put into it," John 12:6). On a purely practical basis, the complaint had some merit, but as was often the case, the disciples failed to grasp the significance of what was happening.

### The Significance

Jesus corrected His disciples by pointing out to them that what Mary was doing was necessary. She was anointing Him for burial (26:10-12). Later He would be buried in such haste that no proper preparations would be possible. Mary was giving them to Him in advance. Her act also constituted a symbolic confession of Jesus' Messiahship, since "messiah" means "anointed one."

---

<sup>2</sup>Hill's comment on this verse is beyond explanation: "The gesture of the woman would not be extraordinary in an eastern home" (David Hill, *The New Century Bible Commentary: The Gospel of Matthew* [Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1972], 334). France more correctly states that it was not uncommon for guests at a banquet to be anointed, "but the use of such an expensive oil was an act of extravagant devotion" (France, *Matthew*, 362).

### The Prediction

"Truly I say to you, wherever this gospel is preached in the whole world, what this woman has done shall also be spoken of in memory of her" (26:13). Such a lovely act of devotion and sacrifice was never to be forgotten. Here we are telling it again two thousand years later!

### THE LESSONS

*We should love and serve Christ with our very best, not with our leftovers.* The law of Moses required that Israel give to God the "first-fruits" of everything they had, not only the earliest of their crops and livestock, but the choicest as well. For this reason, God rejected the sacrifices of the people condemned in Malachi 1 because they were bringing offerings of lame, sick, and blind animals. Such was entirely unacceptable to the God who always gives His very best to His people.

Mary, by contrast, reached into her possessions and found the one most precious thing she had and gave it to Jesus. Why? What would motivate such an extravagant gift? There can be but one answer: *love*. A sense of duty or legal obligation will never motivate that kind of extravagance. This is *the extravagance of love*. As William Barclay has well put it,

Love never calculates; love never thinks how *little* it can decently give; love's one desire is to give to the uttermost limits; and, when it has given all it has to give, it still thinks the gift too little. We have not even begun to be Christian if we think of giving to Christ and to His church in terms of as *little* as we respectably can.<sup>3</sup>

Can we truthfully say that this is how *we* give to the Lord? Do we give the first-fruits of time, money, energy, or only the leftovers once we have wrung all we want out of our lives? Do we, in other words, put the Lord first in our giving of ourselves, or do we offer Him the "pocket change" (sometimes literally!) of our lives? Mary's gift of devotion, like that of the poor widow of Mark 12, sets the standard for truly Christian giving.

*Nothing given to Jesus is ever "wasted."* The disciples' (or Judas') question was, "Why this

---

<sup>3</sup>William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, vol. 1, The Daily Study Bible Series (Philadelphia, Pa.: Westminster Press, 1957), 364.

waste?" Literally, "Why this destruction?" And it was! The expensive ointment was completely consumed in the process of giving it. And they were correct that it could have been put to "more practical" use by giving it to the poor. Yet it is an evil, worldly insinuation to suggest that anything given to Christ is ever wasted! How often is it that the cries of "Waste!" echoed within the church are merely the shouts of the miserly who would rather give as little as possible to the Lord? Nothing that we ever do for Jesus is wasted. We need to be careful about listening to what Barclay has called "the economics of common sense" rather than to "the economics of love."<sup>4</sup> If you give your money to serve Christ, it is never wasted. Nor is your energy, your time, or anything else you might give, no matter how extravagant the gift.

When we are devoted to Christ, we will be misunderstood. The disciples completely misconstrued the meaning and importance of what Mary was doing. Rather than praising her, as Jesus did, for her devotion, they criticized her for her wastefulness. Judging motives is always tricky business and best left to God, the only one who can judge such things accurately. But when we give ourselves fully to Christ, some of our actions may well be misunderstood. Some may say that we are "grandstanding" or trying to impress others. Even our brethren in Christ may do this, especially if our sacrifices for Christ make them feel guilty for withholding from the Lord. What should we do about this potential for misunderstanding? Do not worry about it! This is something that you cannot help. Whether others misunderstand or judge you is largely up

---

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 364.

to them, not you.<sup>5</sup> Be prepared for it, and do not allow yourself to be emotionally destroyed by it. Apparently, Mary was not bothered. There is no indication that she allowed the stinging words of the disciples to deter her in the least, and she ended up being commended by the Lord for doing a "beautiful thing."

## CONCLUSION

Some acts of service are more urgent than others. Jesus pointed out that while serving the poor is a worthy goal, it was not the most needful thing at that particular moment (26:11). They would always have opportunity to do good to the poor; they would not always have Him in their midst, to be able to serve Him in so personal a way. Mary's act of devotion was the more significant because it was the more urgent. In the course of being involved in doing good, we should continually pray to the Lord for wisdom to be sure that we are doing what is most needful. An infinite amount of good can be done in the world. We want to be serving in the ways that are the most urgent.

Mary's act of extravagant love is a splendid example of putting first things first. Above all, she teaches us the beauty of putting Jesus first. Our lives must be right with Him, or all else is meaningless. Lives given in His service can never be wasted!

—Tommy South

---

<sup>5</sup>This was Paul's approach to criticism: "This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. Moreover it is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy. "But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. I do not even judge myself. I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me. Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then every man will receive his commendation from God" (1 Corinthians 4:1-5).

---

# Applying Scripture to Life

---

## *The Pain of Loneliness*

An ad in a Kansas newspaper read, "I will listen to you talk for thirty minutes without comment for five dollars." A follow-up article in the same newspaper reported that the ad generated ten to twenty calls a day. Truly the pain of loneliness is so serious that individuals are willing to try anything for a half-hour of companionship.

Bill & Linda Swetmon  
*Your Friendship Potential*

## *Point of Focus*

A teen-age boy was deeply interested in scientific subjects, especially astronomy. His father bought him an expensive telescope. Having studied the principles of optics, he found the instrument to be most intriguing. He took it apart, examined the lenses, and made detailed calculations on the distance of its point of focus. He became so absorbed in gaining a technical knowledge of the telescope it-

self that he never got around to looking at the stars. He knew a lot about the instrument, but he missed seeing the wonders of the heavens.

## *Hope*

Someone has defined "hope" as "a compound emotion that consists of desire and expectation." To expect without desire is dread; to desire without expectation is despair. Unite the two, and hope leaps up!

©Copyright, 1991, 2004 by Truth for Today  
ALL RIGHTS RESERVED