

Beautiful Ointment and Blood Money: How much is Jesus worth?

Matthew 26:1-16

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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." 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."

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."

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.

The two minute warning, the bell-lap, the 10 second countdown, the 11th hour, and the finale are all ways to describe the last and final moments as an event draws to a close. The end is in sight, and the intensity increases dramatically. Everything that happened previously, while important, is just the prelude to the end. It is the last performance that people remember the most.

Everything that Matthew has written in the previous twenty-five chapters will come into focus in the next three. We've reached the "bell-lap" of our journey through Matthew, and for the next 12 weeks we are going to examine the Passion of Jesus Christ. This is the ultimate story that Matthew wanted to tell because what happens in Matthew 26-28 is the center of the Gospel, the heart of the Christian faith, and the basis of all hope.

Matthew's Mission

We've been studying this book for over twenty months now. Do you remember why Matthew wrote this book in the first place? Let me remind you:

The theme of the Gospel of Matthew is to show that Jesus is the Jewish Messiah, sent to bring the kingdom of God to the entire world. The book has a Jewish foundation and a global mission. Its story-line began by presenting his lineage, his miraculous birth, and his empowerment for ministry at his baptism. Jesus' ethical teaching was first presented in the Sermon on the Mount as fulfilling the law and the prophets. His teaching and his life reached out to the outcasts of society, and as his ministry continued, it grew in scope and opposition.¹ Jesus taught his disciples, confronted the religious leaders, healed the sick, and received a mixed reception. The disciples completely misunderstood his mission, the religious leaders plotted to kill him, and Jesus talked about the closing of the age.

Everything grows in intensity, and all of this culminates in a major conflict in Jerusalem where Judas betrays him, and the religious leaders bring him to Pilate for prosecution. He is condemned, crucified, and buried. Then God gloriously raises him from the dead, and Jesus appears to his disciples. The end of Matthew records his final charge and the climax of the book:

"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 19 Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matt 28:18-20).

Jesus is the Messiah, sent to bring the kingdom of God to the entire world. In this series we are going to look deeply and personally into this section of Scripture and take a fresh and lingering look at the most important moment in the history of mankind and redemption.

Framing the Passion of Jesus

To begin, I want to set the framework around what we'll be seeing and learning. I want you to understand what is happening here. There are four important things to note in verses 1-5.

First, Jesus is transitioning from his teaching ministry to his suffering (v 1). There have been five major discourses in Matthew, and the Olivet Discourse (Matt 24-25) was his last. His public teaching ministry is over. He has laid out the ethic of the kingdom, told his disciples about the future, and now it is time for his greatest message – one which will be lived out. Everything in his life has been about this moment, and this is the reason why he has come; this is the purpose of Matthew's gospel – to show a Messiah who suffers and dies.²

¹ David Turner, Matthew – Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic Publishing, 2008), 1

² This is the point of all four gospels – to make the crucifixion of Jesus Christ known. Roughly 1/3 of the content of all the gospels are related to the last week of his life.

Secondly, the events of the next two chapters happen during the celebration of Passover (v 2). We'll look more at this next week, but it is stunning to consider the significance of Jesus's passion happening during this celebration. The Passover was a spiritual highlight for the Jewish people since it celebrated God's deliverance of his people out of slavery in Egypt, and this celebration would have gathered thousands of pilgrims from all over the nation. Exodus 12 tell us that this event came after nine plagues, and just prior to the killing of every firstborn. The name "Passover" comes from the way that God's death angel passed over the houses of Israelites who had sacrificed a lamb and sprinkled blood on their doorposts. Given what Jesus says, it would have been Tuesday, and in just a few days, he'll become "the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). The sacrifice of a lamb, the application of blood, and being delivered from slavery will become major themes in the New Testament (see Eph. 1:3-10, Heb. 9-10).

Third, Jesus not only predicts his crucifixion; he sees it as his mission (v 2). The next few days will be the unfolding of a divine drama where the forces of evil in the universe and on earth unwittingly fulfill God's plan for making a path for salvation and reconciliation. Satan is behind the scenes; the religious rulers are willing participants; Judas reveals his true colors. And yet through it all Jesus will lay his life down willingly (John 10:18). The passion, while a terrible injustice, was part of the sovereign plan of God to accomplish a greater act of justice (see Acts 2:23).

Finally, the antagonists in the story of his passion are the religious rulers – specifically the chief priests and elders (v 3). Jesus's ministry has challenged their spiritual and political authority. Therefore, they meet at the home Caiaphas, the high priest, in order to determine how they could kill him. They are afraid that Jesus will stir up a revolution and that the Romans will come and take everything away. Here is what John says about this moment. It is an amazing and prophetic statement.

47 So the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered the Council and said, "What are we to do? For this man performs many signs. 48 If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation." 49 But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, "You know nothing at all. 50 Nor do you understand that it is better for you that one man should die for the people, not that the whole nation should perish." 51 He did not say this of his own accord, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation, 52 and not for the nation only, but also to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad (John 11:47-53)

So the priests are afraid at many levels. They have no idea that their diabolical plan is part of both Satan's plans and God's purposes. They must get rid of Jesus, but they have to arrest him discretely. And then they have to find a way to kill him with thousands of pilgrims streaming into the city and the Roman soldiers on high alert.

This is the framework that holds the canvas of Jesus's passion. These few days will be loaded with hatred, betrayal, intrigue, injustice, abuse. And they will be filled with sovereignty, symbolism, and redemption.

Two Responses to the Worth of Jesus

With the framework of the passion established we can look further at two very different responses to the worth of Jesus.

Loved with Extravagance (vv 6-13)

The first example involves a woman and a very expensive perfume. According to verse 3, Jesus was staying at the house of Simon the leper in the city of Bethany (situated near the Mount of Olives). John's account of this event in John 12 helps us know that this was the house where Mary, Martha, and Lazarus lived. Simon was likely a relative (maybe their father?) who had been healed of leprosy.

While they are at Simon's house and having dinner, a woman (Mary – John 12:3) took an alabaster jar that contained very expensive perfume, and she poured it on Jesus's head while he was eating at the table. Then, according to John 12, she poured it on his feet and began wiping his feet with her hair. Both actions were extravagant. The perfume was very expensive (John says 300 denarii – a year's wages), and the action of undoing her hair in public to wipe Jesus's feet would have been a surprising display of humility and deep personal devotion.

But the disciples, once again, miss the significance of what is happening. They respond (v 6) with indignation which means to be angered or outraged such that it looks like grief; they view her actions as a "waste." John tells us that it was Judas who led the complaint (see John 12:5). They say, "This could have been sold for a large sum of money and given to the poor" (v 9). The hard-hearted disciples cover their lack of spiritual perception by sounding spiritual! This is vintage spiritual deception: missing the truly important but sounding spiritual while you do it. Oh be careful what you baptize with Bible verses!

Jesus rebukes them. Listen to what he says:

"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" (Matt 26:10-13).

The disciples have clearly misread the situation. Jesus corrects them in four ways:

1. **He tells them that she has done something beautiful.** They view her actions as a reckless waste, but Jesus views it as an extravagant act of love. Isn't interesting how a Jesus-centered action can be viewed as a waste by some when it is really beautiful?

2. **He rightfully prioritizes the worship of himself over the care for the poor** – even though caring for the poor was extremely important. Jesus is not saying that we should neglect the poor, but he is saying something important that we need to heed very clearly, especially in the midst of the evangelical church’s (and our own) interest in address injustice, poverty, and other similar issues: an adoring heart for Jesus is a higher priority. In other words, knowing and loving Jesus is the ground for all good works, and while loving Jesus and loving others are both important; they are not equally so.
3. **Mary is preparing him for burial.** She and the disciples are all part of a divine plan that will unfold before them. These are important days in ways that they do not even fully understand.
4. **Mary’s actions will be praised when the gospel is understood and proclaimed.** Her extravagant love seems like a waste until you look at it through the lens of the gospel. Once the full implications of the gospel are understood, this anointing will make complete sense. This is what a gospel lens does: it makes costly sacrifice and extravagant love sensible.

Don’t miss this! What do you see when you look at this scene? A woman breaks open expensive perfume, pours it on Jesus’s head, wipes his feet with her hair, and the perfume fills the room. If you know who Jesus is, and if you know what he has done, then this act is incredibly beautiful and fitting. Out of love for Jesus, you’d look at this scene and say, “Of course! It’s Jesus! He’s worth everything!” Knowing Jesus this way is a complete game-changer. It changes how you view suffering, sacrifice, service, marriage, and giving. It changes everything.

Others of you would just miss the significance of the moment because all you see is perfume, a man, and a woman. The problem is that you don’t really know who Jesus is.

One’s relationship with Jesus changes how you view extravagant love.

Betrayed with Vengeance (vv 14-16)

The other response that Matthew gives us is the diabolical offer to betray Jesus on the part of Judas. We will look more fully into the persona of Judas five weeks from now, but for now Matthew simply introduces us to what happened. It is revealing and tragic.

From the very beginning, Jesus knew that Judas would betray him. In his high priestly prayer Jesus said,

“While I was with them, I kept them in your name, which you have given me. I have guarded them, and not one of them has been lost except the son of destruction, that the Scripture might be fulfilled” (John 17:12).

It is remarkable that Jesus chose Judas even though he knew what the outcome would be, and we see that even Judas's treachery is part of God's plan of suffering for his son and redemption for his people.

In verses 14-16 we see how Judas fulfills his role as betrayer. After the "waste" of the perfume, he approached the chief priests and asked them, "What will you give me if I deliver him over to you?" Now this must have been a relief to the chief priests because they finally had a way to arrest Jesus without making a huge scene, and it is remarkable that one of his own disciples – part of the inner circle – would choose to act this way.

In a few weeks, we'll look more closely at Judas and his motivation behind his actions. But what I want to highlight in this message is the price: 30 pieces of silver. It is stunning to consider the fact that Judas not only initiated the betrayal, but he was willing to betray the Son of God for this paltry amount.

Thirty pieces of silver has some biblical history³ and context to it.

32 If the ox gores a slave, male or female, the owner shall give to their master thirty shekels of silver, and the ox shall be stoned (Exodus 21:32)

Notice that this is the price of a dead slave! Thirty pieces of silver is such a small amount when you consider the reality of who Jesus is.

About 10 years ago I was able to visit one of the largest ancient collections of Scriptures in North America. It was the private collection of the Van Kampen Family. The family owned, Van Kampen Merritt which was sold to Xerox in 1984. The VanKampens lived in Grand Haven, Michigan, had a Scriptorium – a secure vault – underground. The collection is now housed at the Holy Land Experience, in Orlando, Florida.

I was part of a private tour of about fifteen people, and there were so many amazing manuscripts to see, including "The Martyr's Bible," an illegal copy of the Bible that was stained by the blood of the man who had hidden it. After he was killed, the Bible was shoved into his body cavity.

But one of the memorable moments came rather expectantly. The tour guide gathered us in a conference room, and he was showing us the various Bibles. Then he pulled out a little black sack, and asked a man seated next to me to stand. He asked him to cup his hands, and he poured the contents into his hands. It was a collection of coins.

As the man next to me looked at the coins, the tour guide asked him, "Do you know what you have?" Of course he didn't. Then the tour guide said, "In your hands are 30 pieces of Samaritan silver." In horror, he dropped the silver like it was on fire and the 30 pieces rained

³ See also Zechariah 11:10-4 for a referenced about the rejection of the shepherd and a foreshadowing of what Judas will do with the money after he realizes what he has done (see Matt 27:5).

down on the table. He sat down in his chair, and I'll never forget what he said. He looked at me with a blood-drained face: "It is so light."

And that's the point. Judas thought so little of the worth of Jesus that he was willing to betray him for the price of a dead slave.

What a contrast we have here between the actions of Judas and Mary. Mary loved Jesus with a stunning extravagance, and Judas betrayed Jesus with a self-centered vengeance. Their actions reveal what they believe Jesus is worth.

What is Jesus Worth to You?

These two scenarios leave us with the important question that everyone of us must answer: what is Jesus worth to you? Allow me to give you some thoughts to help make this question clear.

1. There is a cosmic, spiritual battle for what you see in Jesus

The story of Mary and Judas shows us the dramatic contrast between how people see Jesus. To some he is nothing more than a disappointment or a myth. To others he is more valuable than you can even describe. But this difference is not just a difference in perspective; there is a spiritual battle behind what people see in Jesus.

Satan's aim is to keep people blinded to the reality of who Jesus is. Listen to what Paul says in 2 Corinthians 4:5 – "...the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God." He colludes with our natural sinful desires and the luring attraction of the world to keep people blind to Jesus. He uses the offering of pleasure, happiness, power, intelligence, and fulfillment – all of which are good things – but he offers them apart from Christ. The devilish strategy of spiritual blindness is not a denial that Jesus exists, but a denial that he is more desirable than anything else. It is to convince people (you) that Jesus is one of many options, not **the only** option. It is to convince you that the glory of who he is nothing special. The devil doesn't want you to see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ.

2. Conversion involves a spirit-birthed change in what you see in Jesus

Jesus once told Nicodemus in John 3:3 that "unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." Something amazing happens when a person is converted. God conquers their sin-craving heart and suddenly they see the weight of their sin, the reality of the sacrifice of Jesus, and the beauty of what Jesus has done. A spiritual light-bulb comes on as the person beholds or spiritually "sees" through the eyes of faith how bad they are and how beautiful Christ is.

Conversion means that you have been changed because what you see in Jesus has changed. It means that the cross is not a stumbling block or foolishness but it is the beautiful demonstration of the power of God (1 Cor 1:23). You see the cross as victory.

3. Following Jesus in obedience and suffering is connected to what you see in Jesus

It would be tragic mistake to think that seeing Jesus this way is only a matter of conversion. Seeing through the right set of eyes makes an eternal difference when it comes to daily obedience and even suffering. In terms of obedience, it means that we see following Jesus as more attractive, lovely, and sensible than the offering of sin. And in terms of suffering, it means that we see Christ as worthy of any element of hardship that we would face in his name. Listen to how Hebrews 11 states it:

4 By faith Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, 25 choosing rather to be mistreated with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. 26 He considered the reproach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking to the reward. 27 By faith he left Egypt, not being afraid of the anger of the king, for he endured as seeing him who is invisible (Heb 11:24-28).

What inspires a life-time of obedience? What motivates a follower of Jesus to consistently choose a path of righteousness? What prompts someone to give generously? What woos a single man or woman to swim upstream despite the current of sexual impurity? What causes a follower of Jesus to joyfully suffer in the name of Christ? It is the exceeding, eternal worth of Jesus.

If you know him in all his beauty and if your spiritual eyes have seen him, then an expensive offering makes total sense – “Of course, it’s for Jesus.” But if you do not know him this way, then all that you will see in this story and even in the worship experience today is a huge waste of time and money.

Jesus is viewed as worthy of so much or so little depending on your heart toward him.

What is Jesus worth? Well, it depends on what you see.

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