

Matthew 26:1-16

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Date: 26 April 2020

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[0 : 00] I love biographies. A good biography is both inspirational, it makes you want to do more for the Lord, it makes you want to pray more, it makes you want to serve the Lord more.

But there's another element, isn't there, in a good biography, you wonder how on earth did they get it all done? And when it comes to people who are heroes, I think there's a really fine line between inspiration and encouragement.

People can be deeply inspiring, but they can also leave us mere mortals feeling a little discouraged, can't they? Why aren't we more like them? And what I often feel about heroes is often how I feel when I read about this woman in Matthew 26.

She is a woman who pays a terribly high price to honour Jesus. She too is devoted to Jesus in an outstanding, super-Christian kind of way. She too is prepared to make huge sacrifices in order to serve Jesus.

And I wonder how you react to her. Does she inspire you? Or does she just leave you feeling discouraged at the weakness of your own faith and your love for Christ?

[1 : 18] And that's what I want us to explore this morning. Now, before we get to the woman, first we hear Jesus reminding us that he is going to die. Firstly, that he is going to pay the price.

So look with me at Matthew 26 and verse 1. Jesus is bringing his public teaching in Matthew's gospel to a close.

And now the attention moves to preparing his disciples for what is about to take place. And he says to them, Jesus has predicted his death, hasn't he, on several occasions.

But now he adds a crucial detail. He tells them when. He tells them when he will be handed over to be crucified during the Passover. The Passover, we know, was that Jewish festival, which recalled the exodus from Egypt.

That great moment when God brought his people out of Egypt. When he sent that plague on the firstborn son of the Egyptians, but he literally passed over the firstborn son of the Israelites.

[2 : 30] And those Israelite houses were distinguished, weren't they, by the blood of the lamb on the door. And so there was this annual reminder of God's kindness and deliverance, secured by the blood of the lamb.

And here you find Jesus telling his disciples that it's during that time, the time of the Passover, that he will give his life, he will pay the price. He's beginning to suggest to them, isn't he, that he is the new Passover lamb.

He is the new way to be safe in the face of death. His blood will protect them. Jesus dropped the hint, doesn't he? In a couple of days, during that first Lord's Supper, he'll explain it further.

But at this point, Matthew doesn't stop to explain it. He just simply tells us what Jesus is predicting. And what Jesus is predicting is exactly what the Jewish leaders are plotting.

It's striking, isn't it? In verse 3, he uses the word then. If this was a film, I think we'd have a scene where Jesus tells his disciples he's about to be crucified, and then we'd cut straight to the palace of the high priest.

[3 : 43] And the camera would zoom in on this conversation taking place. And we'd hear them planning and plotting Jesus' arrest and crucifixion. It's a stunning reminder to you and I, I think, that Jesus is not going to be caught by surprise.

What is about to happen is about to happen because God has planned it, and Jesus foreknows it. The chief priests and the elders, they're in their headquarters.

They no doubt think that they are in the process of taking control of the situation. But they're not, are they? Jesus is in control of it.

And what they are planning is exactly what Jesus has predicted. And ironically, I think Matthew tells us they are in the palace. They're behaving as if they've got some kind of sovereignty.

But in reality, Jesus is sovereign here. And we see this even in what they said. Look at verses 4 and 5. And they plotted together in order to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him.

[4 : 45] But they said, not during the feast, lest there should be an uproar among the people. They wanted to avoid killing Jesus during the Passover because they didn't want to stir up trouble for themselves among Jesus' followers.

The population of Jerusalem, it swelled enormously during the Passover festival. So politics is always a little bit more risky around that time.

But of course, Jesus already told us, isn't it, that he would be killed during the Passover time. It was then he would be handed over. And so it proved to be that Jewish leaders are not in control.

They can't even do what they propose to do. The events that are about to unfold will unfold exactly as God wants and exactly as Jesus predicts.

But having reminded us so explicitly of the price that Jesus is soon to pay, Matthew then chooses to tell us of the price this nameless woman pays.

[5 : 46] Look at verse 6. Now when Jesus was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, a woman came up to him with an alabaster flask, a very expensive ointment, and she poured it on his head as he reclined at table.

It is nothing if not extravagant. And Matthew tells us, doesn't he, that it was very expensive. Expert reckon it was some kind of heirloom, an alabaster jar that had been handed down.

People say that it was the equivalent to a year's wages. And so whichever way you look at it, this wasn't some bottle of perfume that you pick up at the chemist. It was an extremely generous gesture.

You notice that's how the disciples saw it. They thought it was a waste. And they take the moral high ground by pointing out what could have been done with the money. Look at verse 8. 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. They think the woman's actions are bizarre and unnecessary, even frivolous. And it's hard for you and I not to sympathize with the disciples.

[7 : 01] It's a pretty strange thing for this woman to do. If someone spends a lot of money buying a present for me, I'd prefer if it was something that I could use, wouldn't you?

And I reckon that is how the disciples felt about this gift to Jesus. It's not as if Jesus was any richer walking away from this moment. But nevertheless, the money has been spent, as it were.

And you can't help thinking, they've made a good point, haven't they? About how the poor may well have benefited from the equivalent in cash. But Jesus thinks they're missing the point. They call it a waste.

He calls it beautiful. Verse 10. But Jesus, aware of this, aware of what they were thinking, said to them, why do you trouble the woman?

For she has done a beautiful thing to me. And verse 13. Truly, I say to you, wherever this gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her.

[8 : 02] Jesus is honoured by the actions of this woman. He's honoured by the extravagance of her action. And it says something about how much she values Jesus.

What she thinks that Jesus is worth. What he deserves. It is not economically rational, but it is something that transcends economics. But I hasten to add, it doesn't transcend reason.

This is a thoughtful and well-judged action, even if it is extravagant. And the woman believes in her heart that Jesus' presence is a rare jewel.

And this moment of history, and this moment of her life and his life, honouring him, is actually more important than giving to the poor. And amazingly, Jesus agrees.

And that's why he says, what she has done will be told in her memory. She has honoured him. And now he says, I will honour her.

[9 : 04] She too will be honoured. And indeed, the fact that we are reading about her today, as literally millions have done so throughout history, is evidence Jesus was right. And it's fascinating that Jesus honours her in this way.

When you think of all the people down throughout history, all the people in the New Year's honours list that you can't remember who they are, all the great titles, and all the great achievements, and all

the letters after their name, and many of them have been completely forgotten. And she is known. This woman, who in Matthew's account doesn't even have a name, she is remembered by every generation who reads these words. Known and remembered for what she did to Jesus. And that is why I think she is nameless here. Because what Jesus wants to honour is not who she is, but what she's done. Because what she did gives honour to Jesus. It alerts us to Jesus' worth. It tells us that Jesus is someone worth paying a very high price for indeed. And that is why Jesus sees her extravagant act of devotion as a thing of beauty.

[10:19] But Jesus sees, doesn't he, an even deeper significance in her actions. Possibly a significance that the woman didn't even grasp herself. Look at verse 12.

In pouring this ointment on my body, she has done it to prepare me for burial. Jesus sees her act of anointing as a special kind of anointing, the kind of anointing that dead bodies were given. The pouring out of the perfume was like Jesus being embalmed. And Jesus sees this beautiful moment as a step in his preparation for that moment to which his whole life has been heading. The moment when he would pay the price, when he would lay down his life for his people. And in a way, she couldn't have understood that at this point. That even this woman would be saved by the death that her anointing prepared him for. The last three verses of our passage, Matthew brings into the foreground this issue that has been in the shadows for this whole section. He tells us, matter of factly, that Judas was one of Jesus' 12 disciples.

[11:33] And Judas goes to the Jewish leaders and he offers to hand Jesus over to them. And the question that he asks in verse 15 gets to the heart of the point of this section.

Do you see what he asks? What will you give me if I deliver him over to you? What is Jesus worth to you?

What is his cost? He asks. And their answer, if you look at it, is 30 silver coins. So what a slave was worth in the Old Testament is what shepherds were paid.

Either way, it's not a lot of money. But Judas agrees with the sum. And so Judas plays the part of the economic realist. Except that his act is not really rational at all.

Because in agreeing with the sum, he agrees with the chief priests. What was Jesus worth? Not very much. And of course, this is what the disciples were struggling with in verse 8, weren't they?

[12:40] They were not convinced that Jesus was worth what the women did. The whole section is about people who undervalue Jesus. The disciples who thought that the woman's beautiful extravagance was a waste.

Judas, who would rather profit from Jesus' death than prevent it. And the Jewish leaders who were not only willing, who were only willing to part with some loose change to get what they wanted all along.

In their own way, all these characters undervalue Jesus. And so together, they provide the backdrop, don't they? The contrast to this nameless woman.

That she alone, of all the key players in the story, values Jesus for what he's really worth. She alone sees Jesus for who he truly is.

She alone seems eager that Jesus gets what he deserves. She is extravagant while all the others around her are stingy or worse. And worst of all is Judas.

[13:48] He was one of the twelve, one of Jesus' closest friends, those he confided in. And yet, he decides that following a so-called king who was only going to surrender his life, well, it wasn't worth it.

Thirty pieces of silver would be worth more than that. And in verse two, do you just notice Jesus predicted the words?

He says, he would be handed over to be crucified. And at that point, we didn't know who by, but by the time we come to verse 16, we make the discovery, don't we, that Jesus will be handed over, will betray him.

You notice, Matthew, the ESV doesn't bring this out, but the words should be there again that sought to hand him over. It turns out that Judas is the handover man.

And so, the chain of events has been started that will lead to Jesus' death, the fulfillment of his prediction. And we see something else that these three short sections have in common.

[14 : 56] Not only is Jesus worth being debated, but Jesus' death is on view at every point. So, verse four, the Jewish leaders are plotting Jesus' death.

And then you have the woman with the alabaster jar who is preparing Jesus for death. And then we see Judas receiving money to bring about Jesus' death. each in their own way.

These people are participating. But only one had any hint that Jesus' death was part of what Jesus made Jesus worthy.

And only one would benefit from Jesus' death and one would be enriched far more generously than she had been generous to him. And it really is the difference between this nameless woman and everyone else in the story that I think is at the heart of this section of Matthew.

Surrounded by people who are participating in killing Jesus, this woman lovingly prepares his body for what he says he must undergo. And surrounded by people who undervalue Jesus, she sees his true worth and she treats him accordingly.

[16 : 06] And so it is her action that shines like a floodlight against the dark backdrop that these other characters provide. But as I said at the start of this sermon, I am in danger of finding this woman's act more discouraging than inspiring.

I'm left wondering to myself, what would I have done if I'd have been at that dinner party? I'm left feeling it's pretty unlikely I would have done what the woman did. I'm left feeling that her devotion is hard to match.

Maybe my faith is weak by comparison. My love for Christ is paltry compared to hers. And though I feel in my heart I should be inspired by her, in actual fact, I can walk away from the sermon feeling deflated and discouraged.

But what I've come to see as I've studied this passage this week is if I walk away like that, I've completely missed the whole point. Because Matthew doesn't want me to be discouraged by this woman and nor does he want me to be inspired by this woman.

He wants me, he wants you to see Jesus. He wants you and me to see what she saw. That is the secret.

[17 : 24] That's what makes this woman willing to honour Jesus so extravagantly. What makes this woman so willing to pay such a high price to serve Jesus?

She sees what Jesus is worth and because she sees Jesus clearly, what she does is the most natural thing to her in the world. And what I want to impress upon you today is that it is a massive mistake to see something like this and see something like this woman does and marvel at her faith. It's a mistake because it falsely assumes that what makes this woman different to me and you is that she has more faith. stronger faith or something like that and that's the very thing that creates discouragement but in fact if there is a difference between me and her it's simply that she sees Jesus more clearly than I do.

That she has seen Jesus more clearly than I do and that is the mistake I think I make with biographies and heroes of the faith I think that it's the amount of faith they had or the strength of their love for Jesus but in actual fact their lives are simply a product of the fact that they have seen Jesus more clearly and they know deep in their soul what Jesus is worth and that is the way with everyone who pays a great price to serve Jesus and honour him extravagantly there are no super Christians but there is a super Christ and there are Christians who see that who see Jesus for all he's worth and there are Christians whose vision of Jesus is blurred and they are therefore pretty stingy or worse and what would it take

I wonder for you and I to give a year's salary to the work of the kingdom of God what would it take for you and I to surrender a life of comfort and to sacrifice greatly for Christ church what would it take for you and I to hand over our biggest fears to Jesus and to go wherever he wanted and to speak in the way that he wants us to what would it take this nameless woman would tell us one thing this morning she would tell us to see Jesus to know who he is to know him as the king who died who is worthy and when you know his true worth deep in your soul there'll be nothing you'd rather hang on to than him and there'll be nothing at all to fear in surrendering yourself to him come to think of it what would it take to just give a tenth of your salary to the work of the church or simply to pray more what would it take for us to repent of those sins that we constantly battle with what would it take for you and I to speak more enthusiastically about Jesus to family and friends what would it take for us to love more graciously those we find it really difficult to love love and this nameless woman would say the same thing to us this morning see

[20 : 55] Jesus you see this passage isn't really about the woman it's about the man whose head she covers with perfume she is nameless he is not and at the end of the day we don't need to know her name but we do need to know what compels her to act in the way that she did and what this passage keeps thrusting before us is what is Jesus worth and the answer is that Jesus is worthy of what this woman did for him and much much more Jesus name is a name that we do know because at the end of the day we do need to know him and the more we know him the more we are more likely we are to see that what the world regards as a total waste being as a Christian living as a Christian Christian priorities even giving of ourselves to kingdom ministry the world sees that those things are a waste but actually they are beautiful in the sight of

God more to the point the more that we know him the more likely we are to see that what we sometimes regard as a waste is beautiful to him and I want to bring you this message today because as you seek to share the gospel with those around you you and I need to remember that what people don't need them need us to tell them is kind of how much faith they ought to have they don't really need us to tell them how empty their lives are if they're not Christians they don't primarily need me to tell them about a Christian worldview or about a Christian ethical standpoint they don't even need I think a kind of basic set of Christian propositions that we want them to believe in but what they primarily need and what in fact they desperately desperately need you to do is to introduce them to

Jesus and they need you to introduce them to Jesus with all the passion and conviction and earnestness of those who know Jesus well and can know about how much he is worth and so you don't need me to primarily tell you how important evangelism is or what method you ought to use or how to answer all the difficult questions that people ask you of course those things are important but if we get trained in those things without pointing people to Jesus actually what we produce is more discouragement than inspiration and what you need more than anything else is to see Jesus clearly and to be absolutely gripped by a compelling sense of what he is worth and that is what I most need and what I most need is not more time not more resources not more generous donors not more ministry partners I need all those things but what will really sustain me for the tiring and responsible work of

Christian service what do we need more than anything you need to see Jesus you need to see him for what he's worth and at the end of the day I have found that the only thing that sustains Christians through trials and temptations and exhaustion and exhilaration of living as a Christian is a worshipful heart and there's only one thing that creates a proper worshipful heart and that is knowing Jesus because when we know him we'll appreciate him and we'll value him and we'll pay great costs and we'll make great sacrifices because we know that he is worthy of it and we'll pay small costs and we'll take small steps of Christian progress for the same reason and we will appreciate Jesus even when we're not doing anything it will simply be the settled conviction of our souls that there is no higher privilege and there is no greater blessing than knowing Jesus and it'll be a joy that we're absolutely gripped by and the most faithful Christians are those who've been gripped by the joy of knowing Jesus and that is because those who know Jesus best are those who know the price that he has paid the most expensive and the most generous price that ever could be paid and those who know Jesus best know that this nameless woman's extravagance towards him was just a shadow of his extravagance towards us and in the light of that nothing we could ever do for him will ever be too high a price those who know Jesus best know that there is no cost so great that they wouldn't gladly pay it for he was and he is and he always will be worthy of it and as I thought about this story this week

[26 : 16] I think it's become a favourite of mine not because this woman inspires me but because this act reminds me of how worthy my Lord is and this woman reminds me that every sacrifice that you have made for Christ is utterly sensible and this woman encourages me to keep surrendering to Jesus and she does that not by pointing to herself but by pointing to Christ God and that is a very different kind of inspiration and I don't know about you but I know what this woman says to me she says that I need to pray this simple prayer that Jesus would open my eyes so that I would see him more clearly 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