

# Matthew 26:1-16

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[ 0 : 00 ] Do you turn if you've got a Bible to Matthew 26. Matthew 26. I'm quite a strong believer in biographies at bedtime. It shows us how God has blessed people in the past.

A good biography is inspirational. My favourite biography is the memoirs and remains of Robert Murray McShane. I've read it with some of you in the church and I love it. As I read about Robert Murray McShane, he was a preacher in the 19th century, he died when he was 28.

He makes me want to be a better man. He makes me want to love God more. He makes me want to get up earlier to pray more. He makes me want to preach more fervently, more feelingly.

As I've read that book a number of times, it is godliness that is most attractive. Robert Murray McShane makes me want to do more for the Lord. But there's another element, isn't there, which we often feel when we read biographies.

How on earth did he do it? Because I can't get up early enough. I wish I could. I certainly can't pray long enough. Do you find that? I find that very difficult.

[ 1 : 39 ] I get too distracted. I can't preach as fervently as Robert Murray McShane. When it comes to people, when it comes to heroes, I think there's a fine line, isn't there, between inspiration and discouragement.

People can be, can't they, deeply inspiring, but they can also leave us mere mortals just feeling a little bit depressed. Why aren't I more like them?

Have you ever felt like that? Why aren't I more like them? I can't be like them. And what I often feel about heroes is how I feel when I read this story of the woman at the start of chapter 26.

Because on this woman, she pays a terribly high price to honour the Lord Jesus. She is devoted to the Lord Jesus in an outstanding super Christian, Mary McShane kind of way.

She too is prepared to make huge sacrifices in order to serve Jesus. And so I wonder how you react to her. Does she inspire you?

[ 2 : 48 ] Or does she leave you discouraged at the weakness of your own faith? And your love for Christ? And that's what I want us to explore this evening. But before we get to this woman, though, we first must hear that Jesus is reminding us that he is going to die.

So point one is the price he is going to pay. Chapter 26, verse 1, brings the public teaching of Jesus in Matthew's Gospel to a close. And now the attention is not on the public teaching, but on preparing his disciples for what is about to take place.

And he says to them in verse 2, he says, you know that after two days the Passover is coming, and the Son of Man, that's how Jesus refers to himself, will be delivered up to be crucified.

Jesus predicted his death several times, but here he adds a crucial detail. Here he says, I'm telling you when it's going to happen. And he says, I'll be handed over to be crucified during the Passover. And you will know that the Passover was that Jewish festival which recalled and celebrated how they were delivered from Egypt. That great moment when God brought them through the Red Sea, when God delivered them and brought plagues on the Egyptians, but he passed over the houses of the Israelites.

[ 4 : 07 ] And on that night, all those years ago, do you remember, the Israelites were distinguished by the blood of a lamb painted on a door. So they marked this annual reminder of God's kindness, secured by the blood of a lamb.

And here you find Jesus telling them, my death is going to be at Passover time. It is at Passover time that I will render my life.

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. It is his blood which we shelter under.

And here Jesus drops the hint. But when he has his last meal with them, later on in chapter 26, he explains it further. But at this point, Matthew doesn't stop to explain.

He just simply tells us, this is what Jesus is predicting. But this is also exactly what the Jewish leaders are plotting. It's striking that he uses the word then at the start of verse 3.

[ 5 : 10 ] If this was a movie, wasn't it, you'd have split scenes. You'd have a scene where Jesus tells his disciples he's about to be crucified. And then you would cut straight to the temple, the palace of the high priest.

And the camera would zoom in on that conversation. Taking place. And we would hear of them planning and plotting Jesus' arrest and execution. And it's a stunning reminder to you and I at the start of chapter 26 that Jesus is not going to be caught by surprise.

What is about to happen to him is part of God's plan and God's foreknowledge. There is nothing here which is outside of God's control.

The chief priests and the elders are in their headquarters. And no doubt they think, we are in control. We're about to take control of the situation. But they're not in control, are they?

Jesus is in control of it. And what they are planning is what Jesus has predicted. And ironically, I think Matthew tells us that they are in the palace, behaving like they have some kind of sovereignty.

[ 6 : 23 ] But in reality, there is only one who is sovereign here, and that is the Lord Jesus Christ. He is king. And we see this even in what they say. Look at verses 4 and 5. And they plotted together.

It's got echoes of Psalm 2. They plotted together in order to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him. But they said, I'm not doing the feast. Lest there be an uproar among the people.

They wanted to avoid killing Jesus during the Passover. So they don't want to stir up trouble for themselves among Jesus' supporters. The population of Jerusalem swells during Passover time. It's a great festival. It's a great festival. And so politics is always a little bit more risky at that point. But of course, Jesus has said it will be during the Passover. It will be exactly then, when he is handed over, and so it proved to be.

The Jewish leaders aren't 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.

[ 7 : 29 ] Exactly as Jesus predicts. But having reminded us so explicitly of the price that Jesus will pay, Matthew then chooses to tell us of the price this nameless woman pays.

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 put it on his head as he reclined at table. It is nothing if not extravagant. It is. It is. It is. Matthew explicitly tells us it was very expensive.

Experts reckon it's some sort of alabaster jar that would have been a kind of family heirloom of some sort. Some people say that it was equivalent to a year's wages. Some say more.

Whichever way you look at it, it wasn't a bottle of aftershave that you can buy at the post office. It was an extremely generous gesture. And you note, that's not how the disciples saw it.

[ 8 : 41 ] Can you see what they say? They say, verse 8, what a waste. And they take the moral high ground. And they point out, well, what could have been done with the money?

Verse 8. This could have been sold for a large sum and given to the poor. They thought the woman's action is unnecessary and quite frankly bizarre. Even frivolous.

And it's hard not to sympathize with them. It's a pretty strange thing for this woman to do. If someone spends a lot of money on buying me a present, I prefer that it was something that I could actually use.

My brother worked out that in the church that he was at, that if he dropped into a sermon in November, there, that he liked a certain type of food, that's what he got for Christmas. So one year he dropped in that he liked Ferrero Rocher.

He's got hundreds of boxes of Ferrero Rocher. You think we don't need that. You see this gift here, isn't it? The disciples, how do they feel about this gift?

[ 9 : 47 ] They feel it's completely unneeded. It's not as if Jesus was any richer walking away from it. But nevertheless, the money has been spent, as it were.

And you can't help thinking, can you? Verse 9. It's a good point. The poor. Think what good could have been done with this money. Think about the cash value.

What you could have done with that. But Jesus says you're missing the point. They call it a waste. But can you see what Jesus calls it in verse 10? He calls it beautiful.

Jesus, aware of this, said to them, Why do you trouble the woman? For she has done a beautiful thing to me. You notice in verse 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.

Jesus is honoured by what this woman did. He's honoured by the extravagance of her action. And it says something, doesn't it, about how much she values the Lord Jesus.

[10:57] It says something about what she thinks Jesus is worth. What she thinks about what Jesus deserves. It is not economically rational.

But some things transcend economics. Although I hasten to add, this doesn't transcend reason.

Because what this woman does is thoughtful and well-judged action, even if it is extravagant.

And the woman believes that Jesus' presence is a rare jewel. And at this moment of history, and at this moment in her life, and her honouring him is actually more important, far more important, than giving to the poor.

And amazingly, and wonderfully, and shockingly, Jesus agrees with her. And that's why he says, what she has done will be told in her memory. She has honoured him, and so she too will be honoured.

And indeed, the fact that we're reading about her in 2023, and literally millions know of her, and read about her, down through history, it's evidence, isn't it, that Jesus was right.

[12:15] And it's a fascinating thing, that Jesus honours her in this way. When you think of all the people, I'm down through history, who've had great titles, and great achievements, and they've had letters after their name, but now they're forgotten.

When you think of the New Year's honours list, at the start of this month, do you remember who the people are on that list? You mean to tell me you can't remember Pauline D, the very first female councillor and mayor, in the town of Wem, Shropshire?

She's a member of the British Empire Medal. Or what about Mary Buck? You know Mary Buck, don't you? From Swanage. She worked tirelessly in the COVID vaccination centre. She's so well known. Or Sue Sayer.

Sue Sayer, that world-renowned, famous founder of the Cornwall Seal Group Research Trust, who received the honour for services to wildlife protection and conservatism. We know her, don't we?

We haven't got a clue. So many, isn't it, of worldly honours are forgotten. And yet, this is a woman in Matthew's account who doesn't even have a name.

[13:26] And yet she's known and she's remembered by every generation that reads Matthew's Gospel. And she's known and she's admired for what she does for Jesus. And that is why I think she's nameless here.

She's not nameless in the other Gospels, but she's nameless here. Because what Jesus wants to honour is not who she is, but as much as what she's done.

Because of what she did, gives honour to Jesus. And it alerts us, doesn't it, to Jesus' worth. It tells you and I that Jesus is someone who is worth paying a very high price for indeed.

And that's why Jesus sees her extravagant act of devotion as a thing of beauty. But Jesus sees an even deeper significance in her action.

Possibly, in fact, I think almost certainly deeper than the woman understood. She didn't grasp. Look at verse 12, what it says. It says, So Jesus sees her act as a special kind of anointing.

[14:33] The kind of anointing that dead bodies were given. The pouring out of a 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 directed to.

That moment when he will lay down his life for his people in a way that she couldn't have understood at this point. Even this woman would be saved by the death her anointing was preparing him for.

And then in the last three verses of the passage, can you see the cost, the price of betrayal, verse 14 to 16? The price of betrayal. And I think Matthew suddenly brings into the foreground what's been in the shadow for much of the gospel.

He tells us very matter-of-factly Judas, one of the twelve, goes to the Jewish leaders and he offers to hand Jesus over to them.

to hand Jesus over to them. But the question he asks in verse 15 I think really helps us.

[15:53] It gets to the heart of the point. He asks, what will you give me if I deliver him over to you? What is Jesus worth to you?

What is the price you're willing to pay? What is the cost? He asks. And their answer is I'm 30 pieces of silver.

It's what a slave was worth in the Old Testament at times. It's what a shepherd got paid. Either way, it's not a lot of money. Judas agrees to the sum.

And so Jesus, Judas plays the part of the economic realist. except his act is not rational at all.

Because in agreeing to that sum, he agrees, doesn't he, with the chief priest.

What was Jesus worth for Judas? To Judas? Not very much. And of course, this is what the disciples were struggling with in verse 8. They were not convinced that Jesus was worth what the woman did.

[17:09] So can you see the whole section of Matthew 26? It's all about people who undervalue Jesus. And the disciples thought that this woman's beautiful extravagance was a waste. Judas would rather profit from Jesus' death than prevent it.

And the Jewish leaders were only too willing to part with some loose change to get what they wanted all along. woman. And in their way, all these characters undervalue Jesus. That's the backdrop.

And so together, they form this backdrop of undervaluing Jesus. And the contrast is this nameless woman. And 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 to give to Jesus what he truly deserves. She is extravagant while all the others are stingy or worse.

And worst of all is Judas. One of the twelve. Jesus' closest friends. Those he confided in. And yet he decides that following a so-called king who was going to surrender his life wasn't worth it.

[18:23] Thirty pieces of silver would be worth more. And in verse two, Jesus predicted. Notice the words. Can you see what it says? Handed over to be crucified.

Delivered up to be crucified. At that point, we don'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 by his friend.

The ESV doesn't help us as much as it should, but that language of handed over is in both verse two and in verse 16. It turns out that Judas is the handover man.

And so the change of events has started that will lead to Jesus' death, the fulfillment of the prediction. And so there's something else we see. These three sections have got something else in common.

because not only is Jesus worth being debated all the way through, but Jesus' death is on view at every point. So in verse four, the Jewish leaders are plotting Jesus' death.

[19:35] And the woman with the alabaster jar is preparing Jesus for his death. And then we see Judas receiving money to bring about Jesus' death. Each in their own way, these people are anticipating it.

but only one had any hint that Jesus' death was part of what made Jesus worthy. And only one would benefit from Jesus' death and would be enriched far more generously than she had been generous to him.

And it really is the difference between that nameless woman and everyone else in the story. And I think it's at the heart of this section of Matthew, surrounded by people who want to participate in the killing of Jesus.

This woman lovingly prepares his body for what he must undergo. And surrounded by people who undervalue Jesus, she sees his true worth and she treats him accordingly. And so it's her action that shines like a floodlight against the dark backdrop that these other characters provide.

people who are not but as I said at the start of this sermon, I'm in danger of finding this woman's act more discouraging than inspiring. I'm left wondering to myself, if I had been sitting around the table at that dinner party, what would I have done?

[20:58] What would I have said? I'm left feeling it's pretty unlikely I'd have said anything different to the disciples. I'm left feeling that her devotion is very difficult for me to match.

Maybe my faith is weak in comparison. My love paltry compared to hers. And though I feel in my heart I should be inspired by this woman, the fact is I can come away from this story deflated and discouraged by her.

What I've come to see as I've studied this passage is if I did walk away like that, I've completely missed the point of the passage. Because Matthew does not want you and I to be discouraged by this woman, nor does he want me to be inspired by this woman.

He wants me to see Jesus. He wants me to see what she saw, and that's the secret. Because what makes this woman want to honour Jesus and to pay such a high price to honour him so extravagantly, what makes her willing to pay such a high price to save Jesus, Jesus does. Because she sees what Jesus is worth. And because she sees Jesus clearly. And what she does is the most natural thing to her in the world.

[ 22 : 27 ] is the moment. And what I want to impress upon you tonight at the end of this Lord's Day is this is massive. It's a massive mistake to 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 is that she's got more faith, or she's got a stronger faith, or something like that. That's the very thing, isn't it, that creates discouragement.

But in actual fact, if there is a difference between her and me, it's simply that she values Jesus more highly than I do.

That she has seen Jesus more clearly than I have. And that's the mistake that I think I've made in the past with biographies like Robert Murray McShane. That I think what makes them different is the amount of faith they had, or the strength of their love for Jesus.

But in actual fact, their life is simply a product of the fact that they see Jesus more clearly. And this woman has come to realize what Jesus is worth.

[ 23 : 37 ] And that is the way with everyone who pays a great price to serve Jesus and honor him extravagantly. There are no super Christians.

Do you hear that? There are no super Christians. Christians. There is just a super Christ. There are no super Christians, but there are Christians who see Jesus Christ.

And who treat Jesus for all he's worth. And there are Christians whose vision is blurred of the Lord Jesus.

And therefore, they are pretty stingy or worse. what would it take, I wonder, for us to give, let's just say, a year's worth of salary to the work of the kingdom?

What would it take for you and I to surrender a life of comfort and to sacrifice greatly for the kingdom? What would it take for us to hand over all our biggest fears to Jesus and go where he wanted us to go and do what he wanted us to do?

[ 24 : 52 ] This lameless woman would tell us one thing. She would tell us, see Jesus. Know who he is. And know him as a king who died because he is worthy.

And when you know Jesus' true worth deep down in your soul, there will be nothing that you'd rather hang on to than him. And there will be nothing at all to fear in surrendering to him.

Come to think of it, what would it take to give a tenth of our salary to the work of the church? Or to simply pray more? What would it take for us to truly repent and break those sins that we constantly battle with?

What would it take for us to speak more enthusiastically about Jesus to family and friends? What would it take for us to have those difficult conversations that we know we should have but they're terrified of having?

What would it take for us to love more graciously those we find hard to live? And this nameless woman would tell us the same thing.

[ 26 : 08 ] See Jesus. Because this passage isn't really about this woman. This passage isn't about this woman. It's about the man whose head she covers with perfume.

She is nameless but he is not. At the end of the day we don't need to know her, do we? But we need to know what compels her to act the way she did and this passage keeps thrusting before you and I what is Jesus worth?

And the answer is he is worthy. he is worthy of what this man 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 likely we are to see that what the world regards as a waste, being as a Christian, living faithfully as a Christian, standing firm as a Christian like we heard this morning, even giving of our lives to kingdom ministry, giving yourself to the life of God's church, those things aren't a waste, but they're beautiful in the sight of God.

And more to the point, the more that we know him, the more likely we are to see what we sometimes regard as wasteful, as beautiful to him. So as I kind of bring this message to you, as we seek to share the gospel and live out the gospel in front of our neighbours and friends, remember

that people that you live amongst and work amongst don't really need you to tell them how much faith they ought to have.

[ 28 : 02 ] And they don't primarily need you to tell them that their lives are empty. If they're not Christians, they know that. You'll primarily need you to tell them about the Christian worldview, Christian ethical standpoint.

They don't even really need a kind of set of propositions that you want them to believe. What they primarily need, in fact, what they desperately need to do is they need you to introduce them to Jesus.

With all the compassion and the conviction and earnestness of those who know Jesus well. And know how much he's worth. And as your minister, you don't need me to tell you primarily how important evangelism is or what method you ought to use or what kind of diagrams and little images you should use.

Or how to answer the tricky questions that people ask. Those things are important. important. But if we can be trained in that, but if we don't put people to Jesus, we produce far more discouragement than inspiration.

And what you need more than anything, what I need more than anything, is to see Jesus clearly. And to be absolutely gripped by that compelling sense of what he is worth. love. And so what I need most and what you need most is not more time.

[ 29 : 31 ] And it's not more resources. And as a church, what we need is not more generous donors and not more ministry partners. At the end of the day, the only thing that sustains Christians through the 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 properly worshipful heart and that is knowing Jesus. Because when we know him well, we will appreciate him.

And we'll value him. And we'll pay great costs and we'll make great sacrifices because we know he is worthy. And we'll play small steps and take small steps of Christian progress.

because we'll have a settled conviction that there is no higher privilege, no richer blessing than knowing Jesus. Those who know Jesus best are those who know the price he has paid.

The price paid is the most expensive and generous price that could ever be paid. And those who know Jesus best know that this nameless woman's extravagance towards him was just a shadow, a picture of his extravagance towards us.

[ 30 : 51 ] And in the light of that, nothing we could ever do for him is a high price. Those who know Jesus best know that there is no cost so great that we wouldn't gladly pay it.

Because he is and he was and he is and he always will be worthy of it. And this has become a favorite story of mine, not because the woman inspires me, but because this act reminds me of how worthy the Lord she serves us.

Some of you have actually made great sacrifices for the Lord Jesus and every sacrifice you have made for the Lord Jesus has been utterly sensible. And this woman encourages you and I to keep surrendering ourselves to Jesus and she does that not by pointing to herself, but by pointing to Jesus.

That's a very different kind of inspiration. She says, I need to pray this simple prayer to Jesus every day. Please open my eyes to see you more clearly.

C.T. Stead has fascinated me since I was a little boy. Charlie Stead, he was a cricketer for England. He was in the name of the cricket team. He gave it all to be a missionary. I think it's fair to say that C.T.

[ 32 : 07 ] Stead was nuts and pretty impossible to work with. He was certainly very hard at work to live with. He saw his wife for three weeks in the last seven years of his life.

I think she was probably relieved. But C.T. Stead said this, because I think he understood Matthew 26. He said, if Jesus Christ be God and died for me, then no sacrifice can be too great for me to make for him.

Let's pray.