

AM Matthew 25:31-26:16 A Study in Contrasts

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[0 : 00] 25. We shall begin reading at verse 31. Matthew 25, verse 31.

When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another, as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. And he will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left. Then the King will say to those on his right, Come you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry, and you gave me food. I was thirsty, and you gave me drink. I was a stranger, and you welcomed me. I was naked, and you clothed me. I was sick, and you visited me. I was in prison, and you came to me. Then the righteous will answer him, saying, Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you? And the King will answer them, Truly

I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me. Then he will say to those on his left, Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire, prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry, and you gave me no food. I was thirsty, and you gave me no drink. I was a stranger, and you did not welcome me. Naked, and you did not clothe me. Sick and in prison, and you did not visit me. Then they also will answer, saying, Lord, when did we see you hungry, or thirsty, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and did not minister to you? Then he will answer them, saying, Truly I say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me. And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.

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.

[3 : 15] 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. Amen. And may God bless to us that reading from his word and to his name be the praise. Let's turn back in your Bibles to the passage we read.

I'd like to speak on Matthew chapter 26 verses 1 to 16 under the title, A Study in Contrasts.

A Study in Contrasts. This passage is very much a study in contrasts. A contrast is drawn between the selfless action of the woman who anointed Jesus with the expensive ointment on the one hand, and the machinations of the chief priests and elders, and Judah's betrayal on the other.

[5 : 39] We sometimes overlook the literary artistry with which the gospels are written. It's no accident that the anointing is framed by the meeting in the palace of the high priest, and Judah's agreement with the chief priests to betray Jesus.

The hostility of the priests and elders, and Judah's treachery, casts the love and devotion of this unnamed woman into greater relief.

Matthew wants us to see and appreciate the contrast. In his gospel, Matthew draws attention to the growing hostility to Jesus.

By chapter 26, that hostility is reaching its climax. The stakes couldn't be higher. The chief priests and elders want Jesus dead.

We're told in verse 4, they plotted together in order to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him. But alongside the growing hostility of his enemies, there are those who believe in Jesus and give him their allegiance.

[7 : 11] We're meant to ask ourselves the question, whose side are we on? Are we for Jesus or against him?

Do we side with the religious and political establishment who have no time for him? Or are we on the side of Jesus' true followers?

Let's look in more detail at the stark contrast which is drawn. First of all, let's consider, with reference to verses 1-5 and verses 14-16, the opposition which Jesus faced.

The opposition which Jesus faced. The chief priests and elders assembled in the palace of the high priest Caiaphas. They had concluded that Jesus was a threat.

A threat they needed to do something about. Jesus didn't fit any of the religious categories they recognized. He exposed the superficiality of their own religion.

[8 : 31] He made them uncomfortable. He challenged the status quo. They couldn't stand his transparent goodness. Far from being attracted by his holiness, they hated it.

A further problem was that Jesus attracted a measure of popular support. And so threatened to undermine the accommodation which they had reached with the occupying Romans.

For these reasons, the chief priests and elders were minded to get rid of Jesus once and for all. They would kill him, but they would do so under cover of some form of judicial process.

It would all be made to look so reasonable. After all, they didn't want to be implicated in anything that might look like murder. And they wouldn't act during the Passover just in case arresting Jesus at a time when Jerusalem was full to overflowing with visitors would cause popular unrest.

The planning of the chief priests and elders was calculated. They knew what they wanted to achieve and they were determined to do it.

[10 : 01] Their planning was underhand. They wanted to do things by stealth in a sly way. They didn't want anything to rebound on themselves. Everything had to have the veneer of respectability even though their underlying purpose was anything but good.

Their planning was unscrupulous. They were out to kill an innocent man. And they weren't held back by moral or religious considerations.

Even their reason for not wanting to have Jesus arrested during the Passover was not a religious one. It was political. They were simply concerned about the risk of public disorder.

As far as the chief priests and elders were concerned the end justified the means. And just as they were scratching their heads about what to do they were handed the opportunity they were looking for on account of treachery from within the close-knit group of Jesus' own disciples.

Judas Iscariot came to them and offered to hand Jesus over. He would look for a convenient opportunity for Jesus to be arrested and alert the authorities.

[11 : 44] All he wanted to know was how much he would be paid for doing this. The enormity of what he proposed doing did not concern him.

As we see in verse 15 his question for the chief priests was what will you give me if I deliver him over to you?

And he seems to have been satisfied with the 30 silver coins that were counted out. Like the plotting of the chief priests and elders Judas' actions were calculated underhand and unscrupulous. The high priest Caiaphas and the disciple Judas joined hands to extinguish the life of the sinless son of God.

The Jewish historian Josephus tells us about Caiaphas. He says that he was adept at political maneuvering. He was a genius at keeping in with the occupying Romans.

[13 : 03] They had changed the office of the high priest so that it had become more like an annual appointment. They wanted to break the center of Jewish power influence.

Yet Caiaphas managed to hold on to the post for all of 18 years. In chapter 11 of his gospel John tells us about a meeting of the Jewish ruling council the Sanhedrin at which they discussed what they should do about Jesus.

What are we to do? They asked. For this man performs many signs. If we let him go on like this everyone will believe in him and the Romans will come and take away our place and our nation. By that they probably meant the temple and the status the semi-autonomous status which the Jews enjoyed. John tells us that at that meeting Caiaphas spoke up.

He said you know nothing at all 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.

[14 : 25] John comments that effectively Caiaphas was prophesying that Jesus would die for the Jews and the scattered people of God.

in that respect there was truth in his words of which he was unaware. But when Caiaphas articulated the principle of the one dying for the many he wasn't thinking in those terms he was thinking in political terms.

He was arguing that killing Jesus was a price worth paying to maintain political stability and preserve political privilege.

Some think that Judas too may have been motivated by political considerations though of a rather different kind. It has been suggested that the name Iscariot is derived from the Latin word Sicarii which was the Latin name for the zealots the freedom fighters who wanted to rid Palestine of the Romans by force.

Perhaps Judas had come to the conclusion that Jesus was not the deliverer the sort of deliverer he was looking for. Almost certainly a motivation which Judas had was the love of money.

[16 : 02] John tells us that Judas was a thief. As keeper of the money bag he used to help himself to what was put into it.

If the love of money had eaten into his soul to such an extent that he was prepared to betray his master for financial reward God, isn't that the clearest demonstration that the love of money is our root of all kinds of evil.

Whatever particular motives Judas may have had, there is surely something utterly chilling about what he did. Almost every reference in the New Testament to Judas describes him as one of the twelve.

The sheer horror of what he did, of his betrayal, reverberates through that phrase. Judas was tremendously privileged.

He was privileged to be close to Jesus throughout his public ministry. He was an intimate of the master.

[17 : 28] And yet in the end he was prepared to betray him for thirty silver coins. Why did Jesus choose Judas in the first place?

We simply do not know. All we can say is that Judas serves as a warning that there is no room for complacency.

Spiritual privilege doesn't automatically guarantee spiritual security. But let's put the hostility of the chief priests and elders into context.

None of this came as a surprise to Jesus. The chapter begins with the words when Jesus had finished all these sayings.

That's an expression which Matthew uses in his gospel to mark the end of a block of teaching. The particular block of teaching which ends with chapter 25 has a lot to say about coming judgment.

[18 : 43] Jesus was aware that reactions to him were mixed. He taught that when he returned in his glory there would be those who would be consigned to eternal punishment as well as those who would enter eternal life.

Jesus also knew that his death was imminent as he says to his disciples in verse 2 you know that after two days the Passover is coming and the Son of Man will be delivered up to be crucified.

ever since they had grasped who Jesus really was he had taught his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders chief priests and teachers of the law that he must be killed and that on the third day he would be raised to life.

Jesus knew exactly what was going to happen. That was after all why he had come into the world. God's purposes were being fulfilled in the midst of all this messiness.

The words of Peter in the sermon on the day of Pentecost are worth recalling. Men of Israel, Peter said, this Jesus delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men.

[20 : 24] Those who were involved in Jesus' death, men like Caiaphas and Judas, they were fully responsible for all they did. But it was by God's set purpose and foreknowledge that Jesus was handed over to them in the first place.

it was the Father's will that Jesus should lay down his life and he willingly humbled himself to death, even death on a cross.

We're here touching on a great mystery. The evil actions of wicked men for which they were fully responsible were used in the purposes of God to precipitate the atoning death of his Messiah.

The forces of hell threw all they could at Jesus. No doubt they thought they had won a tremendous victory as he hung on the cross death.

And yet God turned the tables on them. Through his son's death he defeated sin and death and Satan once and for all.

[21 : 45] Even through the wicked actions of Satan and his henchmen God was at work to achieve salvation for his people.

evil and he still overrules evil in the accomplishment of his purposes. The forces of evil appear to be rampant in our world today and we may well be aware of Satan's activity in our own lives but Satan is not in ultimate control.

God's set purpose and fore knowledge is the ultimate reality in all these things God is at work for his own glory and for the good of his people.

That's the opposition Jesus faced. But in contrast to the sustained hatred of Caiaphas and the Jewish hierarchy and the dreadful treachery of Judas we have sandwiched between them the story of this unnamed woman who offered her costliest treasure to the master she loved.

So let's consider secondly the woman's devotion the woman's devotion. Matthew doesn't tell us the woman's name name.

[23 : 24] Only in John's gospel are we told that she was Mary the sister of Martha and Lazarus. The jar of precious ointment was possibly a precious family heirloom.

It was certainly extremely valuable. John tells us it was worth a year's wages. The woman's extravagant gesture of devotion was in complete contrast to the actions of Judas and the Jewish leaders.

Cold calculation didn't lie behind what she did. No, her action was extravagant and spontaneous. There was nothing furtive or underhand about it.

She anointed Jesus in the house of Simon the leper in the presence of all the assembled dinner guests. And far from being unscrupulous her action expressed sincere and overwhelming love.

She took the most precious thing she possessed and lavished it on Jesus. When the disciples saw what Mary did they were indignant.

[24 : 48] Why this waste they asked? This could have been sold for a large sum and given to the poor. John attributes that comment to Judas Iscariot in particular and comments that he did not say this because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief.

Judas was looking after his own interests. He was out for himself. But it's interesting that the other disciples too while they may not have been motivated by personal greed found it difficult to approve what Mary did.

At one level their objection seems not entirely unreasonable. After all why use something so valuable in one grand gesture.

Aren't the needs of the poor a priority? Shouldn't we be concerned about them? Certainly Jesus cared for the poor and he endorsed acts of practical kindness.

In the parable of the sheep and the goats which we read the king says to the sheep on his right hand come you who are blessed by my father inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world for I was hungry and you gave me food I was thirsty and you gave me drink I was a stranger and you welcomed me I was naked and you clothed me I was sick and you visited me I was in prison and you came to me then the righteous will answer him saying Lord when did we see you hungry and feed you or thirsty and give you drink and when did we see you a stranger and welcome you or naked and clothe you and when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you and the king will answer them truly I say to you as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers you

did it to me Jesus clearly endorses compassion for the poor and he's not dismissing the poor when he says in verse 11 you always have the poor with you but you will not always have me rather [27 : 19] Jesus is making the point that honoring him not least in view of his imminent death takes priority even over serving the poor devout Jews in first century Palestine made a great deal of their almsgiving but however good caring for the poor might be it was more important to honor God's Messiah Mary loved Jesus and she wanted to express her love as best she knew how remember how Jesus was once asked what was the most important commandment and he said the most important commandment is to love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your mind and with all your soul and with all your strength and the second commandment is like it it's to love your neighbor as yourself but note the order the first commandment is to honor

God to love the Lord your God the professing church these days so often forgets that I came across a thought for the week delivered at the Scottish Parliament some time ago and the minister who spoke commended the Parliament for observing Jesus greatest commandment which was to love your neighbors yourself even a minister was forgetting that that wasn't the greatest commandment the greatest commandment is to love the Lord our God with all our heart and soul and mind and strength Jesus saw what Mary did as a beautiful thing he was quick to defend her when the disciples criticized her why do you trouble the woman for she has done a beautiful thing to me R.T. France the commentator says true discipleship embraces not only scrupulous accountancy but also reckless exuberance there is a time to gather and a time to throw away but there was even more to what Mary did her actions as it turned out were singularly appropriate in the circumstances Jesus says in verse 12 in pouring this ointment on my body she has done it to prepare me for burial Mary had poured ointment on the head of a man who was shortly to end up in a grave aromatic ointments and oils were used by the

Jews in preparing a body for burial for burial Mary's action turned out to be highly symbolic it was a pointer to Jesus imminent death had Mary heard Jesus say that he was shortly to die and taken that to heart or was she oblivious to any symbolism in her action was what she did simply a spontaneous deed which in God's providence assumed a significance she did not anticipate whichever is the case the fact was that Jesus had come to Jerusalem to die and in this incident his death was foreshadowed in the rich smell of a sumptuous ointment look at

Jesus words 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 isn't that remarkable Jesus atoning death would prove to be good news for the whole world and amazingly Mary's act of devotion would become part of the story and that's what we are considering here today some 2000 years later far from being a waste what Mary did has never been forgotten isn't it interesting that the disciples accused her of waste and in effect

[33 : 08] Jesus was saying no it's not a waste and it won't be forgotten I think of a friend who studied law at Cambridge he had been converted shortly before he went up to university and he felt called to enter the ministry when an aunt heard what his plans were her comment was what a waste she thought her nephew was throwing his life away by not going into the legal career that his father had enjoyed but that man has gone on to exercise an influential ministry it's a ministry which has been blessed to many people you see nothing done for

Jesus is wasted and nothing is forgotten my friend has seen considerable success in his ministry but there are many others who toil and labor in obscurity and humanly speaking don't see much blessing they may feel disheartened and discouraged but for them too nothing is wasted or forgotten the Lord does not forget and he sees what you do even though no one else may see it he does not forget and he will reward you this passage is a study in contrasts demonstrated that by selflessly and extravagantly lavishing on him the best thing she possessed.

Who made the right choice? I don't think that's in doubt. In the words of the hymn, Only one life, it will soon be passed, only what's done for Christ, for Christ, will last.

Shall we pray? O Lord, we pray that you would help us make the right choice to live for Jesus and not against him.

We pray that you would help us to see our lives here and now in the light of eternity. To give to you the devotion of our hearts and the obedience of our lives.

[37 : 00] We ask it in Jesus' name and for his sake. Amen.