

Worth It

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[0 : 00] This is a fantastic passage. It's so lovely. My great fear is ruining it, frankly, getting my grubby hands on it and ruining it for you. Or if I put that more politely, it's just not possible to do it justice. So let's have a look, shall we? Chapter 26, we've come out of this whirlwind of chapter 24 and 25, and now very familiar territory.

But I want to remind you how shocking it is in verse 2. Jesus says to his disciples, you know, after two days, the Passover is coming and the Son of Man will be delivered up to be crucified. Impossible. We've just had two chapters about the Son of Man coming on the clouds of glory in power and reign, who's seated at the right hand of the Father, the eternal kingdom of this divine human person. And every human, every human's destiny is in his hand because he's the judge of the living and the dead. One sentence later, he says, this same Son of Man is going to be delivered up and crucified. It's just, it's hardly possible. He's going to suffer at the hands of those whom he will judge. This is why chapter 26 and 27, which are about the death of Jesus, are called the Passion. They're not called the Passion of Jesus because of the movie. They're not called the Passion because Jesus is excited and positive. Passion is from the Latin word *patior*, which means suffering.

And Jesus is very clear and specific. He connects his death with the Passover, that great Old Testament festival of rescue by God of his people from Egypt, which came about through the blood of lambs being shed. And now as he offers his life as the great sacrifice for the forgiveness of sins, the great rescue happens. He says he's going to be handed over, which means betrayed both by his own follower as well as by the Jews. He's going to be crucified, which means that Romans are going to have to do it and it's going to happen in two days. That means that Jesus is not just an innocent sufferer and a victim of circumstances. He remains the sovereign Christ even in this suffering. And as we go through, you'll see he sees God's hand at work in every detail of his suffering, which I think is very encouraging to every Christian who is experiencing suffering in any way, shape or form. Because God is not just with you when everything's going swimmingly. It's exactly here in the agony and abandonment and suffering of his son. And just so for us, if things are going badly, it's not because God is displeased with you or your faith isn't big enough where you haven't pushed the right button. He's right there.

He's right there working his good purposes. And the way Matthew brings us into the death of Jesus is through this incredible contrast, a contrast of life and death between the love and devotion and generosity of this woman and the greed and hatred and betrayal of Judas. And by doing that, he brings out the kindness and clarity of Jesus and shows us something of how Jesus' death actually works in our lives today. So I've got three points. It starts in darkness in verses three to five. Then we have this blazing light of what happens in the home in Bethany and then darkness again as Judas betrays.

[3 : 38] So the point one is darkness verses three to five. And you can see it there. We're told about a semi-secret gathering in the house of the high priest Caiaphas in Jerusalem. He was a very savvy political operator, Caiaphas. He lasted longer than any other high priest. He was the chief representative of Israel to the Romans. And he gathered the other chief priests and elders to deal with the Jesus problem.

See verse four? They plotted together in order to arrest Jesus by stealth, literally by deceit, and kill him. They realized the Jesus issue they can no longer just contain. They've now decided they're going to kill him. Yes, this is still one of the ten commandments that they teach others.

But such is their regard for Jesus, they're willing to make an exception for themselves on this one occasion. And they all agree together, verse five, we shouldn't do it during the Passover because it might upset the crowds. Aaron Roberts says it's like this. It's like saying we're going to kill Dan in

the service. We're not. We're going to kill Dan in the service, but we'll do it. We'll wait till the third hymn so the children are not in because it might upset the children, you know.

Here are the highest authorities in Israel. They are completely open with each other about doing murder. Their real concern, their only concern is their popularity and ratings.

What they really need is a secret arrest, an arrest by deceit. Better something at night when the crowds are not around, right? Wouldn't it be great if they had someone on the inside who could give them information to know where Jesus will be at night? And then suddenly in verse six, the light blazes up as we see Jesus through the eyes of this unnamed woman and through the disciples as well.

[5 : 41] So verses six to 13, I've called this the shining light and it is a beautiful story. It's the perfect way to understand Jesus' death because it overflows with uncalculating love and it takes place just across the valley from Jerusalem, up the hill past Gethsemane to Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, obviously healed by Jesus, restored. And the story is very simple.

If you look down in verse seven, a woman comes to Jesus while he's eating. We don't learn her name. She's not the hero of the story, nor is she the center of it. But she takes an alabaster vase, a jar, which is full of costly perfumed oil. It is her most valuable possession. She breaks the top of the jar. She pours it over Jesus' head and anoints him. And the disciples have an extremely awkward and uncomfortable moment. But she decides Jesus is the right person and this is the right moment to take her most precious possession and pour it all over Jesus. And the reaction of the disciples, I think, is very important because I think we're meant to see ourselves in their shoes. It's likely the reaction that we would have if we were there. The significance of what she does is completely lost on them. And part of the suffering of Jesus through this next two chapters is that his disciples never really get it. They fail to get what's going on. They're horrified. They're revolted by what this woman has done, this display of extravagance. They don't look at it and see the depth of her devotion to Jesus. What they're concerned about is the money. Their money sense is outraged. Yes, verse 8, you can see the heart of their dismay. They say, why this waste? It's completely impractical. You just don't do that.

Look, you're never going to get it back. It's worth more than a year's wages. No one's going to marry you now. What use is it? And I think that is a very West Coast Canadian calculation.

Their first view of this is the utilitarian value of what's been done. They calculate its worth. They reduce her devotion to a dollar amount. And they think it's stupid. And because they're vaguely religious, they give a moral and spiritual reason to cover their tracks. They say, oh, it could have been sold and given to the poor. You know, we could have spent it on mission and ministry. But really at heart for them, it's a cash calculation. It's not a calculation of love.

It's a calculation because the calculation of love is the opposite of pragmatism. This is how it works with love. Jacques Ellul wrote a great book on money. And he says this about love.

[8 : 42] He says love is utterly totalitarian. It comes from the whole person. It involves the entire person. It binds the entire person without distinction. Love reaches down into the roots of human beings and doesn't leave them intact. It's true, isn't it? That's why if your faith is cold and pragmatic and sliding, it's always embarrassing when another believer does something extravagant purely out of love for Christ. They don't like it. But Jesus takes exactly the opposite view. And he says three things about what she's done. He says it's beautiful. He connects it to his death. And then he connects it to the gospel. And I just want to look at those three things. Firstly, he says it's beautiful.

Verse 10. Why do you trouble the woman? For she has done a beautiful thing to me. This is great. He stands up for her. He stands the disciples down. It's not the dollar value that matters at all to Jesus. It's the expression of love. Do you know, when I first came to St. John's, the former rector and I walked around Shaughnessy, around the Crescent, very big homes there. I said, these are very expensive homes.

Ah, he said, Jesus doesn't see these homes. I thought it was a great line. You see, here's something Jesus values much more than money. It's the expression of her heart. He doesn't just say that's okay with me or it's a pretty good thing that she's done. He says it is beautiful.

Beautiful. Which doesn't mean if something's beautiful, it comes from God. It means that every act of devotion to Jesus, Jesus finds beauty. Every act of devotion that's directed to him is beautiful in his eyes. It doesn't matter what other people think of you. It can be something that springs from the weakest faith. The least thing you do for him. It's dear to him and it's written in his book of everlasting remembrance. You will be misunderstood if you do things for Christ.

Every sacrifice you make out of love for Jesus will be seen by others as a waste. But it's never a waste to him. He receives it. He values it as beautiful.

[11:12] It says Jesus looks right into our hearts and he sees our motives. You know, we often serve Jesus so long as it fits around my busy life and priorities, as long as there's no real sacrifice. But Jesus sees in this, she is acting out of regard, out of any regard for her own advantage.

The single focus of her action is Jesus himself. And while they say it's a waste, he says it's beautiful. I have a great aunt who was a PE teacher in Australia, a very fit woman, with the age of 35, was in an accident. She became a quadriplegic. And she spent the next 30 years of her life at home.

And the children from her classes that she taught started to come to visit her. And she was free then to be able to share her Christian faith. And over the next 30 years, she shared her faith and prayed with and led many young people to the Lord.

Now, our temptation looking at that is to say, what a waste. And Jesus says, no, no, it's a beautiful thing. Last week in Burkino Faso, gunmen attacked a Christian church.

They shot and killed 24 men and wounded 18 others. They killed the pastor first and then all the men who lived locally. Then they set the church on fire.

[12:33] A month after they'd kidnapped and killed another pastor and three of his family members in the same town, several months after they'd gone into the marketplace and set all the men aside and said, who's not going to convert to Islam?

And they executed 50 more men. And our temptation is to say, what a waste. And Jesus says, no, no, no.

He says, that is utterly beautiful. Every sacrifice to him is beyond precious and beautiful if it's done for him. Do you know, eight years ago, after a long conflict with the diocese here in Vancouver, we lost our church properties.

And many would look at that and say, what a waste. No, he says, Jesus, if you did it for me, it was beautiful. The same is true with sexual faithfulness or financial generosity or being patient with that really difficult person, if you do it for Christ, volunteering in your community, visiting your neighbor. No act of devotion to Christ is wasted. There is a place in Christ's treasury for useless deeds if they are expressions of true love to him.

[13:46] First, it's beautiful. Secondly, Jesus connects it with his death. You see that in verse 11, he says, you always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me.

Now, is Jesus suddenly overturning the Bible teaching on giving to the poor? No. In the very last paragraph of chapter 25, he spoke about giving food to the hungry, water to the thirsty, welcoming strangers, visiting those in prison.

So why does Jesus say this here? He's quoting from Deuteronomy 15 in the Old Testament, where Moses is preparing the people of God to go into the promised land.

And in Deuteronomy 15, Moses says two things about the poor. Number one, he says, there will be no poor among you. Israel is to provide the needs of others, not harden their hearts against those who have least.

And then seven verses later, he says, there will always be poor among you. That the work is ongoing, that we have to open wide our hands. And that's the normal posture of believers.

[14:56] But Jesus chooses one side of that equation because this is different. This is unique. And what is unique is you will not always have me with you. In two days, he's going to be crucified.

And you see here in verse 12, he connects the anointing with his death. And I'm sorry to tell you that our translation leaves out the key word. So if you take a pen, please.

At the beginning of verse 12, you could put F-O-R, four in pouring this ointment on my body. You see the logic? Verse 10, he said, she's done a beautiful thing for me.

Verse 11, four. You always have the poor with you, but you won't always have me. Verse 12, four in pouring this ointment on my body. She's done it to prepare me for burial.

Jesus is saying this is the thing that she's done is a thing of beauty because she is the first one in this gospel beside Jesus himself to understand that he's really going to die.

[16:01] She is the first one to believe that the Christ must suffer and die. That's why she pours oil on his head. Isn't that remarkable?

The other disciples see it as a waste of money, but she has understood in some way we don't quite understand that the love and kindness of Jesus is pushing him forward to this crucifixion.

And she wants to honour Jesus and she wants to honour his death and so she sacrifices the most precious thing that she has to him as a sign that she recognises that he is going to sacrifice his very self.

She counts what she has as lost for the sake of gaining Christ and him crucified. As I say, we don't know what she understands. Was she there in chapter 20?

Did she hear Jesus say that he would give his life a ransom for many? We just don't know. But somehow she places her treasure in Jesus' death and if there's any doubt about it in our minds, Jesus himself makes the connection.

[17:03] He says it's beautiful. He connects it with his death. And thirdly, he connects it to the spread of the gospel, 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.

This is so positive. Now, faced with betrayal and imminent death, Jesus looks beyond his death to the resurrection, beyond his resurrection to the mission, to the ends of the earth.

It's because he knows his death is not the end. It's the beginning of the proclamation of the gospel. This gospel, he says, which has at its heart the death and resurrection of Jesus.

This gospel which defies death, not just through Jesus' resurrection, but for us as well, giving hope to all who come to him. And so Jesus gives this greater significance to her action.

Because it's tied to his death, it's going to have permanent significance until he comes again. And that's what his death does. It takes every ordinary and extraordinary action, if they're done to Jesus Christ, and lifts them up and purifies them as worship to him.

[18:19] I mean, the fact that we are reading it today is fulfillment of Jesus' words. That's the shining light. And thirdly and finally, we just return to the darkness in verses 14 to 16.

What a contrast. I mean, these are grubby words, grimy reality of betrayal. You know, we've just gone from this beautiful action and worldwide proclamation, and then in verse 14, Judas approaches the chief priests, and they couldn't believe their luck.

They thought, our prayers for murder are answered. He is the perfect inside guy. He can tell them where Jesus intends to be when he goes to the Garden of Gethsemane at night.

He can lead them to Jesus in the dark so they don't get the wrong guy. And I don't know, you might know that over the last 40 years, there have been attempts to rehabilitate Judas' reputation, to say that he's been badly misunderstood, a victim of circumstance.

The only problem with that is that it runs completely contrary to the evidence and is the opposite of what the Gospels teach. Notice Matthew points out in verse 14 that Judas is one of the 12.

[19:35] He's not an outsider who's taken a dislike to Jesus. He's heard the Son of God speaking the words of God from heaven, words that have never been heard before.

He's seen Jesus do miracles such that Moses and Abraham could hardly have looked at. And somehow it's not changed his heart. It's not shifted this one most fundamental value.

He still loves money more than Jesus. And in verse 14, he takes the initiative to betray Jesus. The chief priests don't go out and look for someone amongst the 12, the weak link.

No, Judas seeks them. And although the Gospel writers don't go much into Judas' motivation, the only suggestion there is, is his love of money. So when he goes to the chief priests in verse 15, his first words to them are to make sure about the price.

How much will you give me to betray him? Pay me first and then the treachery. And they offer him 30 pieces of silver, about a month's wages. And that's a price you get when you lose a slave.

[20:45] And from that moment on, he begins to look for a chance to betray Jesus. So, the Son of Man becomes the object of a financial exchange.

Jesus, the eternal Son of God, becomes merchandise. And the value that Judas puts on his life and the priests put on his life is 30 pieces of silver. What a stunning contrast with what the woman has done.

She sees in Judas the infinite value and beauty and worth of Jesus. But Judas chooses not to see it. And I think it's worth reflecting on Judas as we come into Lent, as the church does.

I mean, Jesus was very important to Judas. He was so close. Back in chapter 10, Judas had been sent out on mission with the rest of the 12 by Jesus.

Through Judas, God had healed the sick and cast out demons and cleansed lepers. Judas had proclaimed the kingdom of heaven and called others to repent. But somehow, it hadn't penetrated his heart.

[21 : 57] And his willingness to sell Jesus out exposes what's truly valuable to him, that he hasn't really seen the infinite beauty and glory of Jesus Christ.

And every time we betray Jesus with that darling sin or that failure to love others, we're treating something else as more important and glorious than Jesus.

And we move toward the darkness, which in the end swallowed Judas. But every time we realize it, and every time we come back to God and ask him for help with repentance and faith, Jesus says, that's beautiful.

Any step in his direction, any step for the sake of Jesus himself, is cleansed by Jesus, is made holy to God. It's a thing of beauty. And the sweetness and savour of a Christian serving is that of working toward the person of Jesus Christ, of doing things for him and to him and toward him.

And he loves it. And we step into the light, brothers and sisters, because of the death of Jesus. It's because of his death and resurrection that Jesus breathes meaning into our lives beyond we could possibly intend or imagine or understand.

[23 : 19] So that everything we do for him and in him and for him and to him has effects that we can never imagine. It's going to be a great and wonderful shock in heaven to see the tremendous consequences and significance of the most humble deeds done for him.

All our prayers, all our prayers, all our sacrifices become fully lovely through the cross of Jesus Christ. And through his cross and resurrection, they gain permanence.

They gain a fragrance of him. Amen. Amen. Amen. Not because of their dollar value. Not because of the virtue of our intentions, but through Christ alone. Amen.