

On August 7, 2007, Barry Bonds hit his 756th home run, which broke Hank Aaron's home run record. Most of the talk, at that time, about the new record was whether it should count because of Bond's alleged use of steroids. Sports buffs said if his name were to go into the Hall of Fame record book there should be an asterisk next to his name. The asterisk means that the record is a sort of record, a footnoted record.

The asterisk idea didn't go away. Mark Ecko, the man who bought the ball that Bond's hit to set the record asked fans on an internet poll what he should do with it. The fans voted to brand the ball with an asterisk and then donate the marked ball to the Baseball Hall of Fame.

Having an asterisk by your name is actually something we all should be able to identify with. Somehow, we are tainted. We don't belong. We aren't accepted by others, and really even more important, we don't feel accepted by God. It is terrifying to think that God has a list somewhere with each of our names on it, and next to our name is an asterisk reminding us that we are tainted, stained, not right, not accepted, not loved, not set free, and not at peace.

If for some reason you have the thought that God has an asterisk next to your name, this chapter is for you. Chapter 26 turns the page and begins the final act. Everything else in Matthew has been the prologue, the introduction to this great final act. And this final act centers us on the only hope humanity has. It is belief; it is faith in who Jesus Christ is and what he did for us - what his death accomplished for us.

The Apostle Paul understood this. When Paul preached to the church in Corinth, he defended himself and his message when he said, "I didn't come to you with great eloquence or come to you with great human wisdom, I came to tell you about God's great plan to redeem humanity." And then he boiled down the plan to this:

**For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. 1 Corinthians 2:2**

This final act of Matthew is the climax of God's plan to save humanity. This final act is the only hope for humanity. And Paul tells us that knowing Jesus Christ and him crucified is the only thing that removes the asterisk next to our name.

Over the next few weeks, we will delve deeply into the last three chapters of Matthew, leading up to Easter. As we study this final act together, may we learn more of what is true about us, and what is true about God. And may we learn to wait on God in this season leading into Easter. May we wait on God to act in our lives.

I was praying a prayer this week written by a man named Ted Loder who wrote "Guerrillas of Grace, Prayers for the Battle."

**O God,**

**Let something essential happen to me, something more than interesting or entertaining, or thoughtful. O God, Let something essential happen to me, something awesome, something real. Speak to my condition, Lord, and change me somewhere inside where it matters,... Let something happen in me which is my real self, God. Amen**

So, let's delve into this final act found in Matthew chapter 26. The first thing we see is that the final act is a scene of grace.

### **The Final Act is a Scene of Grace**

In chapter 26 Matthew details the preparation for the cross and the arrest of Jesus.

**When Jesus had finished saying all these things, he said to his disciples, "As you know, the Passover is two days away—and the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified." vv. 1-2**

The first thing to notice is that Matthew wrote, "When Jesus had finished saying these things." We see these words four prior times after Jesus had completed a key teaching section and when he introduced the next narrative. The first time we see it is right after he taught the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 7:28, and the last time we see it is here right after Jesus finished another teaching on another mount, called the Mount of Olives. But this time is different. Matthew adds the little word "all." Jesus' teaching was all done; the final act had begun. In verse two, Jesus prophesied about the Passover. It was likely Tuesday in this verse and Passover would begin at sundown on Thursday. Jesus prophesied about his death. The Son of Man title referred to his authority as God, as the Messiah, the Christ, the anointed one who prophesied his coming death.

Just a little bit of information on the Passover. The Passover was the final plague before the exodus of the Israelites from their slavery in Egypt. This was when the angel of the Lord passed over

the houses that had the blood of the Lamb on the doorposts but killed the first-born sons of all the Egyptians. Here is Jesus' own Passover story. God's people would be saved ironically when God the Father did not pass over his own first-born Son.

This was the appropriate time for his death. Some have written off Jesus' death as a quirk of fate, an unintended death of a good teacher, who maybe said too much and got the religious powers that be angry and they had him killed.

Remember, there were many times when people sought to kill Jesus but were unable. Herod massacred all the first-born infants around Bethlehem, but God intervened. Jewish leaders sought to kill him soon after his public ministry began three years before. Later they sought to have him arrested when he healed a man on the Sabbath. All these attempts failed because it was not God's time or God's way for the Son to die.

The point is that even though his death was near, God was in control, and although no one else in this last act is at peace, Jesus is - sovereign grace at work. No human plan or power would change a detail in this last act. In John 10:18, Jesus said,

**“No one takes my life from me, but I lay down my own life of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again.”**

God wants us to know that Jesus loved us so much he voluntarily gave his life so whoever believes in him will not perish but have eternal life (John 3:16).

The appropriate time for Jesus to die was Passover when the sacrificial lambs were slain because that celebration pointed to the Lamb of God who took away the sins of the world!

Not only is the final act a scene of sovereign grace, it is also a scene of hate.

### **The Final Act is a Scene of Hate**

The scene changed from where Jesus was talking to the disciples just outside the city of Jerusalem to the center of the world, as far as religious Jews were concerned. The scene changed to the home of Caiaphas, the chief priest over all the Jews, who probably lived in the nicest and cleanest house in town.

**Then the chief priests and the elders of the people assembled in the palace of the high priest, whose name was Caiaphas, and they schemed to arrest Jesus secretly and kill him. “But not during the festival,” they said, “or there may be a riot among the people.” vv. 3-5**

Think about what these guys were doing. They were plotting the to kill Jesus and at the same time preparing for their Passover by purifying themselves. So, they were all taking baths, scrubbing themselves in the tub, while they plotted their evil.

In their minds, they thought this was the right time to arrest Jesus because they knew Jesus was in Jerusalem in and among

the large crowd gathered to celebrate Passover. As they plotted, they realized they couldn't have him arrested publically because the crowd loved Jesus and would likely turn on them, and then the wrath of Rome would come down on them.

**Then the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the Sanhedrin. “What are we accomplishing?” they asked. “Here is this man performing many signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and then the Romans will come and take away both our temple and our nation.” Then one of them, named Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, spoke up, “You know nothing at all! You do not realize that it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish.” John 11: 47-50**

The irony here is incredible to me. It comes at us two ways. First, Caiaphas wanted to kill Jesus so he and his nation wouldn't suffer the wrath of Rome. But by avoiding the wrath of Rome, they would suffer the wrath of God.

Second, little did he know how true his words were, “That it was better for one man to die.” Jesus died for the people, so that the whole nation, even bigger, all of humanity would be spared the righteous wrath of God that we all deserved for our sins. God used this act of hate to bring healing to his creation.

Now if you think the scene of grace and the scene of hate is interesting, wait until you see this third scene of the final act.

### **The Final Act is a Scene of Love**

Set between two acts of hatred, the plot of the priests and Judas' betrayal is a love story. It's one of the greatest love stories of the greatest love story ever told. Listen to these next two verses.

**While Jesus was in Bethany in the home of Simon the Leper, a woman came to him with an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume, which she poured on his head as he was reclining at the table. Matthew 26:6-7**

Here is more irony. We just left Caiaphas's scrubbed clean sanitized palace of hate, and now we are in a dirty little home of Simon the Leper. And where was Jesus preparing for Passover? Not in a palace but in a modest house in a little town outside of Jerusalem, home of a leper, probably a former leper that Jesus had healed. But it wasn't a house of hate; it was a house of love.

So, who was this woman? Again, Matthew is into ironic contrasts. This time it's between an unnamed woman and the named men. Jesus was named, Caiaphas was named. Judas would be named. Even Simon the Leper was named. Matthew does name women in his gospel. He named five in his genealogy back in chapter 1. But the contrast here is between the lowly woman in the first-century world and Caiaphas who was about the most important man in Jesus' day. She showed love. He showed hate. And this woman was a disciple of Jesus, and so were the 12. But in the

next two days Judas betrayed, Peter denied, and the other ten men left, all deserted when Jesus was raised up on the cross. Only the women stood beneath the cross and came the next day to the tomb. Even the lowliest can love the Lord. Even no names like you and me can praise his name.

We can learn from how this woman loved Jesus. First, she loved Jesus above all.

**When the disciples saw this, they were indignant. "Why this waste?" they asked. "This perfume could have been sold at a high price and the money given to the poor." Aware of this, Jesus said to them, "Why are you bothering this woman? She has done a beautiful thing to me. The poor you will always have with you, but you will not always have me. vv. 8-11**

Actually, the disciples were partly right here. Scholars would say that it is likely the woman had a jar of pure nard. It would have sold for the equivalent of a laborer's annual wage. This woman likely poured out \$35,000.00 worth of perfume on Jesus. But the disciples were wrong that what she did was wasteful. It was not wasteful. Jesus said it was beautiful. Why? Because it was done to Jesus. Without the "to me" in verse 10, this is an absolute waste of money.

He went on to say, you will always have the poor, but you will not always have me. This woman shows us, the church, that Jesus must be first, above money, above family, above education, above a home, and even above the homeless.

The better way is not to put off serving people. We will always have the social gospel (love our neighbor, be for our neighbor, love the poor), but along with the social gospel, we also have the gospel of Jesus Christ, in which our worship of God and his Son Jesus always comes first. Love God first, and love people second.

Not only did this woman love Jesus most of all, she also loved Jesus with costly love. It's likely she brought in a family heirloom, an alabaster flask and she broke open the flask and poured it over Jesus' head. Can you picture that? It's a picture of extravagance! A picture of costly sacrifice! In fact, those disciples were likely thinking, "Are you serious? Lady, you are unstable. This is plain crazy."

The lesson here isn't how we can be more impulsive with our check writing. This amazing scene of love asks the questions, "Are you willing to love Jesus with what is most valuable to you?" Loving Christ is costly. We should feel it when we give our worship to God.

Another hard question this text compels us to ask is this: What does it look like for each of us to take the caps off our alabaster jars of precious possessions and pour them out for Jesus? It so obvious in our story that it pleases God when we arrange our lives around loving Jesus more than anything else. God takes

notice when we love Jesus with a costly kind of love. Here is one more observation about this woman: The woman loved Jesus for who he said he was.

**When she poured this perfume on my body, she did it to prepare me for burial. v. 12**

This woman was probably Mary, Mary of Bethany, the sister of Martha and the brother of Lazarus. She knew Jesus; she sat at his feet to listen to him. She saw Jesus raise her brother, Lazarus, from the dead. She couldn't have known everything about what was about to happen, but she had a sense that he deserved her costly love. He deserved to be anointed, maybe in her mind, as king. Maybe she did understand that he would soon die. We don't know for sure.

Either way, Jesus used this woman to teach his disciples that he was going to die. Dead bodies were anointed with perfumes to cover the smell. But if a person died a criminal's death, there is no anointing. Jesus knew that he would die a criminal's death on a cross, so he made it plain that it was right for Mary to pour her costly perfume on his head to prepare him for a proper burial.

If we want to be trained on what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ, just look at this woman as the model. We are to love Jesus above all and with costly love and for who he said he is. The son of Man who was delivered over to die and be buried for our sins.

Look at Jesus' response to her worship. He was so pleased. When the men were indignant over what they thought was waste, Jesus defended her. Then Jesus praised her. The boys got it wrong, but the girl got it right. Jesus said she had done a beautiful thing. Jesus loved her, he defended her, and then showed the ultimate act of love by dying for her.

**"Truly I tell you, wherever this gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her." v. 13**

Think about that. The accomplishments of kings and presidents, business titans, industrialists, generals, and philanthropists are completely forgotten as if written in the sand; but the grateful act of this one humble Christian woman is translated into about 3000 languages reaching around the world. The final act was a scene of sovereign grace. God was in control. It was a scene of hate. The most religious wanted Jesus dead. It was a scene of love. This woman worshipped Jesus for who he was and what he had done for her. Do you want to be remembered like this woman? Don't build monuments on earth, but build the lives of other people. Let your love for God flow into the lives of other people.

### **The Final Act is a Scene of Betrayal**

While this unnamed woman will be remembered for her worship, one of the 12, named Judas, and will live in infamy around the world.

**Then one of the Twelve—the one called Judas Iscariot—went to the chief priests and asked, “What are you willing to give me if I deliver him over to you?” So they counted out for him thirty pieces of silver. From then on Judas watched for an opportunity to hand him over. vv. 14–16**

Judas spent three years in the closest possible association with the only perfect man who ever lived. Yet in the end, he turned his back on Jesus and gave him up to be murdered. It was a horrible act of betrayal, and Judas experienced a horrible end.

Why did Judas do it? We can never know for sure. It may be that the love of money had eaten into his soul and he was prepared to do anything for a little cash. Actually, if this is the true reason, Judas provides the clearest case for the love of money to be the root of all kinds of evil.

But it may be a political motive that inspired Judas to betray Jesus. He was known as Judas Iscariot, which ties into the Latin name *sicarius* which is the name for zealot. Zealots wanted to drive the Romans out of Palestine at any cost. Maybe Judas wanted to get rid of Jesus so another could rise up and lead a political revolution. Or maybe Judas thought that if the people saw Jesus die as a martyr, it would trigger a violent revolt against Rome. We don't know for sure his reason.

But here is what we know for sure. Jesus said, “Woe to the man who betrays him. Better than he had never been born.” And Jesus also said, “What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul?” And Judas did forfeit his soul. Jesus called Judas “the one doomed to destruction.”

The contrast is amazing. How could Judas have missed learning what was truly valuable and giving up everything for it? I don't know, but I know that many people sit in a Christian church and hear good sermons, have Christian parents, are around people who sincerely follow Jesus, and who do good things for others, but who do not reach the point of making a personal commitment to him as their Lord and Savior. They do not understand the final act. For me, it boils down to this.

#### **I learned this from the woman who anointed Jesus:**

Those who do understand the Final Act ask, “How much can I give?”

And from Judas, when he said in verse 15, “What are you willing to give me if I turn him over to you?” I learned this.

**Those who don't understand the Final Act ask, “How much can I get?”**

I think there is a lesson here for all of us at CPC. Our attitude as we prepare for worship makes all the difference. Do we come to worship with an attitude asking, “What are you willing to give me?” Or do we come to worship with an attitude like this unnamed woman, “How much can I give? How generous can I be? What of value can I leave before him because of who he is and what he has done?”

This past Wednesday began the 40-day season of Lent, which will conclude on Easter Sunday. Millions of Christians around the world participate in Lent by committing to giving things up for spiritual reasons with the hope of drawing closer to God. Some people eliminate chocolate, TV, or alcohol - whatever they see as something that dulls their senses toward spiritual things. Lent can also be seen as a time to add something positive, such as adding more time to pray, to read God's Word, or serve those in need, with the hope of drawing closer to God.

Whether we observe Lent or not, I want to suggest a spiritual exercise to help us search our souls. Before we gather again next Sunday, serve Jesus extravagantly. Pour something precious upon him. For me, I think it may be an extended time, unmeasured time, for personal worship. For you maybe a precious gift given in the name of Jesus to someone else. Or you give a couple of hours to read Scripture, or pray, and maybe pray for an extended time for our church.

Begin this spiritual exercise by thinking about what he has given, this final act, his death on the cross. Think about what he has given until your heart starts to fill, and then search for some perfume you can pour out upon the Lord. Ask the Holy Spirit to help you in your weakness and dullness. How wonderful it would be for all of us to sense Jesus saying to us, “You have done a beautiful thing to me!”

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

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