

This past week began the season of Lent. It is a season of reflection and preparation for Easter. My desire for you is to draw your attention to Jesus and give you space to reflect on His sacrifice for you. We are going to look at three passages about sacrifice. The first and third stories will help us see the second story in a way that adds a new dynamic. I want to offer some observations on these stories, and ask you to consider the Jesus that is presented in Matthew's story.

An Unexpected Ending

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." 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." Matthew 26:1-5

Passover was the central feast in Jewish culture. The historian, Josephus, estimated over two and half million people were present in Jerusalem during Passover. The point of the Feast was to tell the story of God's deliverance of His people from oppression. Passover is the story of sacrifice and vindication.

This particular Passover, Jesus said, would involve an action against the "Son of Man." From Jewish theology, the "Son of Man" is the person who would receive power and authority from God to defeat the oppressive powers of the world. Jesus used this phrase of Himself - He is the central figure in the redemptive story of God. But instead of the victory procession that you would expect with the arrival of God's redemptive agent in the world, the Son of Man (Jesus) would die by crucifixion. Rather than conquering the oppressive powers, He would (seemingly) be defeated by them.

Judas

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, one who had journeyed with Jesus and seen the work of God firsthand, had a role in the crucifixion and death of Jesus. Judas betrayed Jesus for thirty pieces of silver, equivalent to six

months of wages. Judas set in motion the sacrificial death of Jesus.

So, Matthew gives us a preamble to the events of Jesus' death. But in the middle of these two events is a story that, at first, seems out place. You may wonder how it fits. But we're going to see it from an angle, which shows how it leads to a broader picture of the sacrificial death of Jesus.

The sacrifice is the gift

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. 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. When she poured this perfume on my body, she did it to prepare me for burial. Truly I tell you, wherever this gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her." vv. 6-13

A woman comes to Jesus with an alabaster jar. This type of jar was used for valuable oils or fragrances. It had a long neck that was sealed and had to be broken off to open. Depending on the type of perfume used, this particular jar could have been worth a year's wages.

As nice of a story as it is, the question that I have is this: Why would Matthew tell this in-between plots of Jesus' death? What does this act have to do with what Jesus is about to do?

Preparation and Picture

One purpose is preparation for what's coming next. Everything is leading to the moment of Jesus' death on the cross. But I think there is more. Yes, this is a story about preparation, but it is also a story, which gives us a picture of the sacrifice Jesus is about to make. She gave the most precious thing she had - a year's wages worth of perfume. Jesus will give the most precious possession He had - His life. But even more than that, her act shows us something about sacrifice. Sacrifice is what makes a gift truly a gift. Think about it - this wouldn't be the same story if she

grabbed a bottle of olive oil and doused Jesus. The sacrifice - the cost to her - is what makes her gift truly a gift.

We tend to avoid sacrifice. How often have you thought, "I'll give as long as it doesn't cost me"? Or, "I'll commit unless I have something better." We think sacrifice is to be avoided. But what if sacrifice is part of the gift? Or maybe you're on the other side, and you wonder what good does sacrifice bring. You give and labor endlessly, at a cost to yourself. You have those days at work that drain, exhaust, or stress you. And you wonder if you're making a difference. Or maybe your parenting feels more like surviving. You are giving an enormous amount of effort and wonder if anything is getting through to your child. The disciples said the same thing about the woman's sacrificial gift - "Why this waste?" But Jesus had a different perspective: her sacrifice wasn't a waste, rather "a beautiful thing to me." What the disciples saw as a waste, Jesus saw as beautiful.

Sacrifice is beautiful because sacrifice is what makes a gift a gift. You wouldn't be where you are without the sacrifice you gave at different points in your life. You wouldn't be who you are without that conflict that you couldn't get passed, without sleepless nights studying in school, without those days you couldn't get out of bed, or without the tears that didn't stop flowing. We tend to avoid telling those parts of the story. But what if those moments of sacrifice are part of the gift? What if the moments that seem like a waste or a loss, are part of something beautiful?

This makes Judas' betrayal all the more tragic. Judas asked, "What are you willing to give me?" Yes, but there is more. Greed is a symptom of disappointment. Jesus was not the type of Savior that Judas wanted. Sacrifice is not how Judas believed the world should work. Interestingly, he received six months of wages to reject Jesus, while the woman gave away year's worth of wages in devotion.

The sacrificial love of Jesus

The New Testament writers used sacrifice as the image to describe God's love. For example, 1 John 4:10 locates God's love in the sacrificial death of Jesus. Love is not merely a good feeling, but a sacrificial gift.

Do you think about God's love for you in that way? Maybe it's easy to believe that God loves you a little - that He gives only what is convenient for Him. But God didn't love you a little. God loves you to the uttermost limits. William Barclay puts it this way, "Love never calculates; love never thinks how little it can decently give; love's one desire is to give to the uttermost limits."

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

During this Lent season, may your mind and heart be stirred in reflection upon the sacrificial love of God for you found in Jesus.

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