JESUS ANOINTED AT BETHANY

Matthew 26:1–16

Key Verse: 26:10

“Aware of this, Jesus said to them, ‘Why are you bothering this woman? She has done a beautiful thing to me.’”

Have you ever heard the expression, “Do something that *matters*”? So many people feel like what they’re doing in life *doesn’t* really matter. All our struggles to get ahead, to become financially stable, to have some achievements in life—what do they all matter? To offset a sense of meaningless some people try to “give back” what they received, to share with those less fortunate. It’s noble, but trying to do good may not really change anything or make a lasting impact. In great frustration so many people ask, “What does it *matter*?” In today’s passage we find a person who seizes the moment and, according to Jesus, does something that *really matters*. At the time, it seemed like it *didn’t* really matter. It didn’t change anything, it didn’t move anybody’s heart, it didn’t prevent bad things from happening. But Jesus teaches that this woman’s deed is an example for all future believers all around the world, including us. Who was this woman? Why did she do what she did? Why did it matter? And how can we be like her? May God open our hearts and speak to us through his words today.

Look at verse 1. It begins, “When Jesus had finished saying all these things…” This expression is used in Matthew’s Gospel every time Jesus finishes one of his five major discourses (7:28; 11:1; 13:53; 19:1; 26:1). In this case, it’s the last time he gives any extended public teaching. He ended his public teaching ministry partly because people were not really listening, but mainly because God had something else for him to do.

Look at verse 2. Here he’s talking to his disciples. He’s predicting his upcoming death, which was just two days away. He’s predicted it to his disciples three times before (16:21; 17:22,23; 20:18,19). So why is he telling them again? Does Jesus just like to repeat himself? No. And his saying it isn’t going to stop it from happening, or protect his disciples. In fact, it doesn’t change their minds or seem to help them at all; as we’ll soon see, when he’s arrested, they’ll all desert him and flee (31,56). So what’s his point in repeatedly predicting his death to his disciples? Though they didn’t understand, they’d remember it. And later, they’d realize that his death wasn’t an accident, or a tragedy. It was God’s sovereign plan. Actually, it was the reason Jesus was born and came into the world. God sent his Son on a mission, to save his people from their sins (1:21b), and he could do it only through his own crucifixion.

To the disciples, the word “crucifixion” must have sounded horrible, maybe too much to take in. But death by crucifixion was a reality in their society. It was humiliating, disgraceful, and real torture. Jesus’ life had had such an impact: so many amazing healings and teachings, so many followers. How could his life and ministry end like that? What may have been even harder to grasp was that Jesus would be “handed over.” The Greek word is also translated “betrayed.” It’s like our words “snitch,” “informer,” or “squealer.” It would be like a stab in the back: Jesus would be turned in to the police, even though he did nothing wrong.

Look at verses 3–5. These religious leaders have been plotting for a long time to kill Jesus (12:14), and now they were ready to do it. They thought they’d kill Jesus *after* the festival, but God was going to make it happen *during* the festival. They thought *they* were in control of everything, that they were smarter than everyone. But in fact, God was ruling and overruling them, accomplishing his own plan (Ps2:1–2; Ac4:28). As Proverbs 21:30 tells us, “There is no wisdom, no insight, no plan that can succeed against the LORD.”

Then Matthew turns our attention to a very different person. Read verses 6,7. Bethany was a wealthy suburb of Jerusalem. Simon the Leper was wealthy enough to have a home there. He was likely somebody who’d been healed by Jesus; otherwise, he’d still be in quarantine. His money couldn’t heal him, but Jesus did. It says that at his home, Jesus “was reclining at the table.” That was how people of that time would eat their meals, not sitting on chairs but laying on cushions at a short table close to the ground. It was somewhat unusual for Jesus to be in a wealthy person’s home having dinner, but it was a special occasion. It was a dinner given in Jesus’ honor. His disciples also were there (8a).

And then, in comes this woman. It says she “came to him with an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume.” Alabaster is a soft mineral that’s partly see-through. To hold perfume, it was shaped into a jar with a very long neck that could easily be snapped and broken. The other Gospels tell us that this one jar of perfume was worth a year’s wages (Mk14:5; Jn12:5). In today’s average, that might be about $40,000. What kind of perfume was *that*? And *who* would *have* such perfume? Only a woman from a rich family. It was most likely given to her from her youth by her parents, to hold onto until her wedding day. To most women, the wedding day may be the most important day in life. To this woman, this jar of perfume was her secret treasure. Maybe she didn’t have much else.

But what did her action mean? Why would she come to Jesus and pour this perfume on him? Most men wouldn’t want to wear women’s perfume. But this woman wasn’t playing a prank; she wanted to honor Jesus with her expensive perfume. So she came up from behind him and poured it on his head. We don’t know how, but everybody there knew how expensive it was (9). So, what she was doing was very personal, but at the same time, very public.

It’s also very interesting that in this passage, there’s not one word *spoken* by this woman—all that matters is what she *did*. Her one act of devotion to Jesus speaks volumes. What does it say? It expresses how much she loved him. The only reason we would ever give up a personal treasure to somebody else would be because we loved that person, right? Personal sacrifice like this can only be done *willingly*, out of *love*. So why did this woman love Jesus so much? She didn’t just have a distant crush on him. John’s Gospel tells us that her name was Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus, who were close friends of Jesus. Jesus had just raised her brother Lazarus from the dead, and Mary did this out of gratitude to him. It was probably even deeper than that. Jesus taught elsewhere that greater love comes from a greater awareness of his forgiveness (Lk7:47). Through her experience with Jesus she’d tasted his grace of forgiveness of sins. She’d realized what a sinner she was, and yet how Jesus loved her still. Her heart was so full of his grace, she could not *but* do something for him in return.

In the previous passage Jesus talked about serving the needy as if we were serving him (25:40). But why do anything for Jesus at all? Why not just live for ourselves? That’s how most “normal” people are living anyway, right? It seems strange, even crazy, to be giving our treasures away to somebody else. Some people do good things out of a sense of duty. Some do it to earn others’ favor, or with a superstitious idea that good will come back to them. But this was done quietly, out of love. No other reason, just love. So many people had come to Jesus to get his help. Some had come to criticize. But this woman came just to do something *for him*, to show him love. She didn’t care what people would think of her or say about her; she was just compelled to show him love.

What happened? Look at verses 8–9. “Indignant” means “angry.” They called it a “waste.” They thought it was a missed opportunity to help many poor, starving people with the money that could have been gained from that perfume. They thought this woman was being too emotional and extravagant. They didn’t understand her heart at all. John’s Gospel tells us that the real objector was Judas Iscariot; so the other disciples must have chimed in with him. Judas didn’t say this because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief, stealing from their common money bag (Jn12:6). How ugly and hypocritical Judas was!

What did Jesus say? Read verse 10. Jesus rebuked his disciples for bothering the woman. They called what she did a “waste,” but Jesus called it “a beautiful thing.” Some people hate to waste food. Some hate to waste time. But doing things passionately can also seem like a waste, like rooting for our favorite team, only to see them lose, or working so hard to save money, only to have to spend it on something we didn’t want, or helping somebody wholeheartedly, only to get used in the end. When we’re young, with so many options ahead of us, we wonder what we should be giving our lives to. Gaining a stable job and having a family, only to grow old and die can seem so meaningless. What should we be doing with our lives? Where should we be pouring out all our passion, all our life’s treasures? It can seem really hard to figure out. Social causes can seem appealing, but people often highjack them for their own agendas. After dedicating ourselves to something for many years, who wants to conclude that it was all just a waste? What really *matters*?

Read verse 10 again. Jesus said she did a beautiful thing “to him.” Living for Jesus, doing beautiful things for him, is never a waste. Jesus still sees the hearts of those who love him, and he accepts as beautiful forever the things we do out of love for him. Apostle Paul learned this secret. After experiencing his forgiveness, Paul poured his life into serving Jesus (Php2:17; 2Ti4:6). He was misunderstood, slandered, many deserted him, and he ended up in prison. But he wrote, “For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain” (Php1:21). He wrote, “What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ” (Php3:8).

Many of us may have had passion when we were young, but not anymore. How can we rekindle a real passion in serving Jesus? How can we give our whole hearts to him once again? Maybe we need to repent of calculating, of comparing ourselves with others, of loving the world too much, of loving ourselves too much, of loving some sin too much. Whatever our problem may be, we all need to reflect on Jesus’ grace in our personal lives, until our hearts are moved and restored. Only when we realize how much Jesus loves us can we love him in return (1Jn4:19), and do something that really matters.

Jesus also taught a principle. Look at verse 11. It tells us we need to get our priorities straight. We shouldn't abuse this to excuse ourselves from helping the needy. At the same time, we should keep the focus on Jesus himself. We need to be ready for any opportunity to serve him, in whatever way he shows us. Look at verse 12. Jesus saw a much greater significance in this. He saw that she was preparing his body for burial. He took her act of devotion and gave it an eternal meaning. Look at verse 13. Jesus wants us all to learn something here. Loving Jesus from the heart is what really matters.

Look at verses 14–16. Judas was one of the Twelve. He’d been so close to Jesus. But he never really opened his heart to him. He was all head, but no heart. Eventually his smartness got him into big trouble. Only Matthew mentions the thirty silver coins. Those coins stand in stark contrast to Mary's very expensive perfume. Thirty silver coins represented the penalty an owner of an ox had to pay if his animal gored a slave to death. In the big scheme of things it wasn’t much money. It shows that Jesus' life was valued like that of a slave. But Mary valued Jesus as more precious than the greatest treasure on earth.

Let’s read verse 10 again. Let’s pray that somehow, we all can do beautiful things with our lives for Jesus, things that really matter in our world.