

Matthew 26:1-16

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[0 : 00] Please turn back with me in your Bibles to the passage we read together. I'd like to look with you at Matthew chapter 26 down to the end of verse 16.

Matthew 26 verses 1 to 16 under the title, A Study in Contrasts. A Study in Contrasts.

This passage is a study in contrasts. A deliberate contrast is drawn between the selfless action of the woman who anointed Jesus with the expensive perfume on the one hand, and the machinations of the chief priests and elders, and the disciple Judas on the other.

We sometimes overlook the literary artistry with which the Gospels are written. I think it's no accident that the account of the anointing is framed on the one hand by the meeting in the palace of the high priest Caiaphas, and on the other by the account of Judas' agreement with the chief priests to betray his master.

You see, the hostility of the chief priests and elders and the treachery of Judas cast into greater relief the love and devotion of the woman.

[1 : 33] Matthew wants us to see and to appreciate the contrast. As he writes 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. All along, the chief priests and elders haven't liked Jesus.

But now they want him dead. We're told in verse 4, they plotted to arrest Jesus in some sly way and kill him. Only his death would satisfy them now.

But alongside that growing hostility, Matthew reminds us that there were those who loved Jesus and who believed in him.

There were those who gave him their allegiance. And I'm sure that Matthew wants us, as we read his Gospel, to ask ourselves the question, whose side are we on?

[2 : 49] Are we arranged with the political and religious establishment of Jesus' day against Jesus? Or are we among his followers?

Let's look in a little more detail at the stark contrast drawn in this brief passage between Jesus' enemies and one of his friends.

First of all, then, let's consider in the light of verses 1 to 5 and verses 14 to 16, the opposition Jesus faced. The opposition Jesus faced.

We're told in verse 3 that the chief priests and the elders of the people assembled in the palace of the high priest Caiaphas. They had come to the conclusion that Jesus posed a threat.

You see, he exposed the superficiality of their religion. He made them feel uncomfortable. He didn't fit any of the religious categories they recognized.

[3 : 53] He challenged the status quo. They couldn't stand his transparent goodness. Far from being attracted by his holiness, they hated it.

Jesus also attracted a measure of popular support. And so he threatened to undermine the accommodation the Jewish religious authorities had reached with the occupying Romans.

And so 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 some form of judicial process.

It would all be made to look so reasonable. They would follow due process, at least superficially. 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 while Jerusalem was full to overflowing with visitors would provoke civil unrest.

[5 : 00] On a grand scale. The planning of the chief priests and elders was calculated. They knew what they wanted to achieve.

And they were determined to do it. Their planning was underhand. They wanted to do things, we are told, in a sly way.

They didn't want anything to rebound on themselves. Everything had to have the veneer of respectability and propriety. Even though their underlying purpose was anything but decent.

Their planning was unscrupulous. They were out to kill an innocent man. And they were also unconcerned about religious scruples.

It's interesting that the reason for not wanting to arrest Jesus during the Passover wasn't a religious one. It was political. They were concerned about the risk of public disorder.

[6 : 01] However, 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, events conspired to give them the opportunity they were looking for.

For Jesus faced not only hostility from his enemies, but also treachery from within his own tight-knit group of disciples.

We're told that Judas Iscariot went along to the chief priests and offered to hand Jesus over to them. He would look for a convenient opportunity to hand Jesus over.

However, he would alert the temple authorities. All he wanted to know was how much they would give him for performing this service.

The enormity of what he proposed meant nothing to Judas. All he was bothered about was how he could turn things to his own financial advantage.

[7 : 19] As we see in verse 15, his question was, What are you willing to give me if I hand him over to you? And he seems to have been satisfied with the 30 silver coins that were counted out for him.

You see, like the plotting of the chief priests and elders, Judas' actions were calculated, underhand, and unscrupulous.

Here we have the high priest Caiaphas and the disciple Judas joining hand in hand to extinguish the most perfect life there had ever been.

The Jewish historian Josephus gives us a description of Caiaphas and his family. And it seems that Caiaphas was adept at religious and political maneuvering.

He was a genius at keeping in with the occupying Romans. When the Romans came to power in Palestine, they changed the office of the high priest and turned it into something like an annual appointment.

[8 : 33] You see, they wanted to break the center of Jewish power and influence. And yet Caiaphas managed to hold on to the job for all of 18 years.

John tells us in his Gospel how, on one occasion there was a meeting of the Sanhedrin, at which they discussed what they would do with Jesus. They were concerned that Jesus was performing miracles and that everyone was believing in him.

And they were worried that the Romans would come and take away their place and their nation. And John tells us how Caiaphas spoke up and said, you don't realize that it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish.

John comments that Caiaphas was effectively prophesying that Jesus would die for the Jewish nation and the scattered children of God. There was truth in his words, of which he was unaware.

But when Caiaphas articulated the principle of the one dying for the many, what he had in mind was that killing Jesus was a price worth paying to maintain political stability and preserve political privilege.

[10 : 10] Caiaphas was a political operator. And he was influenced in his opposition to Jesus by political considerations.

Some suggest that Judas too may have been influenced by political considerations. A possible derivation of his name Iscariot is that it is a corruption of the Latin word Sicarius.

Sicarii was the Latin name for the zealots, the people who wanted to rid Palestine of Roman domination by force. Perhaps Judas had come to the conclusion that Jesus was not the deliverer he hoped he would be.

If Jesus was thinking of death, then no way would he deliver Israel as Judas might have hoped. It's also possible that Judas' actions were motivated by the love of money.

John tells us in his gospel that Judas was a thief. He was a keeper of the money bag and he used to help himself to what was put into it. Perhaps the love of money had eaten into Judas' soul to such an extent that he was prepared to do anything for cash.

[11 : 38] If so, it provides the clearest demonstration in all history that the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil.

It's interesting how recently there has been a report of a gospel of Judas which appears to exonerate Judas, which makes him out to be a hero instead of the villain of the piece.

And the media have focused to a great extent on this particular manuscript. And it's interesting how they are prepared to challenge the clear witness of the New Testament.

Of course, the gospel of Judas is a late document. It was known about in the early church and was not regarded as in any way reliable.

It reflected the teachings of a heretical group. In the New Testament, the consistent witness is to Judas as someone who betrayed his master.

[12 : 54] Whatever motivated him, there's something utterly chilling about what he did. Almost every reference to Judas in the New Testament describes him as one of the twelve.

He was one of the twelve. The sheer horror of his betrayal reverberates through that phrase. Judas was privileged to be close to Jesus throughout his public ministry.

He was an intimate of the master. And yet, in the end, he was prepared to betray him for thirty silver coins. There's mystery here, too.

Why did Jesus choose Judas in the first place? Why was he one of the twelve disciples? We simply don't know. All we can see in this connection is that Judas serves as a warning that there's no room for complacency.

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

[14 : 13] None of this came as a surprise to Jesus himself. Chapter 26 begins with the words, When Jesus had finished saying all these things.

This is an expression which Matthew uses in his gospel to mark the end of a block of teaching. That last block of teaching ends with chapter 25.

We read there about the sheep and the goats. Jesus speaks there of coming judgment and he recognizes that there would be those in the judgment who would be consigned to eternal punishment as well as those whose destiny would be eternal life.

Jesus knew and taught that there would be a division between those who honored him and followed him and those who had no time for him.

Jesus knew that there were those who were his enemies. And Jesus also knew that his death was imminent. He knew that he would be killed at the Passover.

[15 : 23] And so he tells his disciples in verse 2 that Passover is two days away and the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified.

Jesus knew what was coming. Ever since his disciples grasped the fact that he was the Christ, the Son of the Living God, Matthew tells us in chapter 16, from that time on Jesus began to explain to 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 and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.

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

Peter's words on the day of Pentecost are worth recalling. Men of Israel, Peter said, Jesus of Nazareth was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge and you with the help of wicked men put him to death by nailing him to the cross.

Those who were involved in Jesus' death, including Caiaphas and Judas, were fully responsible for what they did. But it was by God's set purpose and foreknowledge that Jesus was handed over to them in the first place.

[16 : 55] It was God's will that Jesus should lay down his life. Jesus willingly embraced the Father's will as he freely embraced, freely chose the path of obedience to death, even death on a cross.

We're touching here on something which is very mysterious. The evil actions of men for which they were fully responsible were used in the purposes of God to precipitate the atoning sacrifice of the Messiah.

The forces of hell through all that they could at the incarnate Son of God. No doubt they saw his death as the greatest triumph imaginable. But the amazing thing is that God turned the tables on Satan and his minions.

Through his son's death he decisively defeated the powers of darkness once and for all. It is a great mystery. But I think we can understand enough to draw a degree of encouragement from this.

Often it seems that the forces of evil are rampant in our world. And sometimes we're aware of Satan's activities in our own lives. But the fact is that Satan is not in ultimate control.

[18 : 18] God's set purpose and foreknowledge is the ultimate reality. And he is so great that he can overrule evil in the accomplishment of his purposes.

the opposition Jesus faced. But in contrast to the sustained hatred of Caiaphas and the Jewish hierarchy and the terrible treachery of Judas, we have sandwiched between them the story of this unnamed woman who made the offering of her costliest treasure to the master she loved.

So let's consider secondly the woman's devotion, the opposition Jesus faced, but in contrast the woman's devotion. In Matthew's gospel the woman is unnamed.

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 incredibly valuable. John tells us it was worth a year's wages. We're meant to contrast the woman's extravagant gesture of love and devotion with the attitude and actions of the Jewish readers and Judas.

- [19 : 47] There was nothing coldly calculated about what she did. It was extravagant. There was nothing under hand about it. She did what she did openly in the home of Simon the leper, before all the assembled dinner guests.

And far from being unscrupulous, what she did was the expression of overwhelming love. She took the most precious thing she had and lavished it on Jesus.

Jesus. When the disciples saw what she did, 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.

John attributes that comment to Judas in particular. He comments that he didn't 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. As for the other disciples, they may not have been motivated by personal greed, at least to the same extent, but they too found it difficult to relate to the woman's selfless action.

- [21 : 07] At one level, their objection was not unreasonable. Why waste something so valuable just like that? Weren't the needs of the poor up priority?

Well, the parable, the account of the sheep and the goats in chapter 25 highlights the fact that Jesus wasn't unconcerned about the plight of the poor.

He cared for the poor. He endorsed acts of practical kindness. And he says to those on his right in the account of the sheep and the goats, I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.

Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me. Jesus Jesus Jesus Jesus clearly endorses the propriety of ordinary actions done out of love for him.

He is not dismissing the poor when he says to the disciples the poor you will always have with you. Rather Jesus is here making the point that doing service to him takes priority even over serving the poor.

- [22 : 38] This woman was motivated by overwhelming love for her master and she expressed her adoration as best she knew how. Her action wasn't a grand gesture for its own sake.

It was an expression of her worship. The devout Jews of first century Palestine made much of their almsgiving.

This was one of their good works. They made a virtue of it. But however good caring for the poor may be what is more important is to honour God's Messiah.

That is what is most important. And nothing lavished on Jesus is wasted. Jesus was quick to defend this woman in the face of the disciples' criticism.

Why are you bothering this woman? she has done a beautiful thing to me. The Bible scholar R.T. France comments, true discipleship embraces not only scrupulous accountancy, but also reckless exuberance.

- [23 : 55] There is a time to gather and a time to throw away. And there was something else. What this woman did was singularly appropriate in the circumstances.

Jesus says in verse 12, when she poured this perfume on my body, she did it to prepare me for burial. Her offering of perfume was a pointer to Jesus' imminent death.

Mirror, or perfume as it's translated in the NIV, was used in preparing a body for burial. Whether she knew it or not, this woman was pouring ointment on someone whose body was about to be buried hastily, without being properly treated with aromatic spices.

And Jesus welcomed the symbolism of her action. Her spontaneous action assumed in the providence of God a significance she hadn't anticipated.

Jesus had come to Jerusalem to die. And here, on this occasion, in the house of Simon the leper, his death was foreshadowed, not in bleak horror and despair, but in the rich smell of a sumptuous ointment.

[25 : 23] Jesus says, wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told in memory of her.

The good news of Jesus' death and resurrection would be proclaimed with joy throughout the world, and in the coming ages, this one woman's act of devotion, would be part of the story.

And so it is. Here today, in 2006, we recall the selfless action of this woman, Mary. I think what she did highlights two things for us.

It highlights that nothing done for Jesus is wasted. And it also highlights that nothing done for him is forgotten.

It seems improbable that one woman's presence to Jesus should be recounted in the preaching of the gospel all over the world.

[26 : 41] But so it has turned out. Michael Green, commenting on this passage, writes, those twin facts, that nothing done for Jesus is wasted, and nothing forgotten, should nerve disciples to take the cap off their alabaster jars of precious possessions and pour them out for Jesus.

I wonder what precious possessions we have that would be fittingly used in the service of Jesus.

Jesus said of this woman, she has done a beautiful thing for me. Yes, other people might not understand, they might misunderstand and might misrepresent, but nothing done for Jesus is wasted or forgotten.

The opposition Jesus faced, the devotion he received. This passage, as I said, is a study in contrasts.

Paifas and the religious establishment plotted against Jesus, and Judas betrayed him. They did their very best to undermine Jesus and his mission, but they didn't succeed.

[28 : 16] For all their power, they didn't succeed. this unnamed woman offered Jesus not hostility, but worship.

She selflessly gave Jesus the best thing she had. And Matthew is in no doubt as to who made the right choice.

a challenge for you and for God. In the words of an old hymn, only one life will soon be passed.

Only what's done for Christ will last. Shall we pray? O Lord, we recognize the contrast that has been presented to us in the passage we have been studying together.

We see the hostility of the chief priests and elders, the treachery even of a Judas. And Lord, we recognize that we are no better than they.

[29 : 38] We too have evil hearts of unbelief potentially. Lord, deliver us from opposing your son, the Messiah whom you have sent.

May we be like this woman who recognized who he was and who gave him the very best she had. Lord, we ask that you would give us wisdom to know how you would have us serve you in these days.

May it be true of us as it was true of her that she did the Lord Jesus a beautiful thing. We ask it in his name and for his sake.

Amen. May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all evermore.

Amen.