

'The Cross and the Heart'

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[0 : 00] Please turn then in your copy of God's Word to Matthew chapter 26. Matthew chapter 26.

! 1 to verse 16. If you have one of the blue church Bibles, which should be in the seat or the pew in front of you, that can be found on page 831, Matthew 26, verse 1 to 16.

If you've been with us the last few Sunday evenings, really since the start of the year, you'll know we've been working through the book of Zechariah. We've hit pause on that just now. We've kind of come to the kind of thematic heart and center of that. Last week, a wonderful passage, wonderfully preached. We'll pause it there. We're going to finish Matthew's gospel as we kind of run up to Easter and we'll return to Zechariah later in the year. So Matthew chapter 26 and verse 1.

When Jesus had finished all these sayings, he said to his disciples, you know that after two days the Passover is coming and the Son of Man will be delivered up to be crucified. Then the chief priests and the elders of the people gathered in the palace of the high priest, whose name was Caiaphas, and plotted together in order to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him. But they said, not during the feast, lest there be an uproar among the people.

Now, when Jesus was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, a woman came up to him with an alabaster flask of very expensive ointment, and she poured it on his head as he reclined at table.

[1 : 59] And when the disciples saw it, they were indignant, saying, why this waste? For this could have been sold for a large sum and given to the poor. But Jesus, aware of this, said to them, why do you trouble the woman? For she has done a beautiful thing to me.

For you always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me. In pouring this ointment on my body, she has done it to prepare me for burial. 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.

Then one of the twelve, whose name was Judas Iscariot, went to the chief priests and said, what will you give me if I deliver him over to you? And they paid him thirty pieces of silver.

And from that moment, he sought an opportunity to betray him. Please do keep that open in front of you, and let's pray and ask for God's help as we come to his word.

Heavenly Father, I ask that the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts would be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

[3 : 31] We now approach the closing scene of our Lord Jesus Christ's earthly ministry. Hitherto we have read of his sayings and doings. We are now about to read of his suffering and death. Hitherto we have seen him, the great prophet. Now we're about to see him, the great high priest. It is a portion of scripture which ought to be read with peculiar reverence and attention.

The place on which we stand is holy ground. Here we see how the seed of the woman bruised the serpent's head. Here we see how the great sacrifice to which all other sacrifices of the Old Testament had long pointed. Here we see how the blood was shed to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

And the lamb slain who takes away the sin of the world. So wrote the former Bishop of Liverpool, J.C. Ryle, about this passage. As we start this last section of Matthew, Matthew 26, 27, 28, we could say it all comes down to this. Matthew's gospel has been described as a passion narrative.

That is a narrative all about Jesus' suffering and death, a passion narrative with a long introduction. Well, that long introduction is over. Verse 1 of our passage here, Jesus has finished his last public sermon. He's preached his last public sermon. This block of teaching about his second coming that we've had on the Mount of Olives is done. It's over. It's finished. No more healing the crowds, no more casting out demons, no more preaching tours. What's going to happen now? Verse 2, crucifixion. The cross beckons. Hitherto, wrote J.C. Ryle, we have read of his sayings and doings.

We're now about to read of his suffering and death. Friends, it all comes down to this. And Matthew opens this section, this new section of his gospel, by showing us how the cross, the cross which is only a few days away, casts its shadow on everything, casts its shadow now on everyone and into everyone's heart. Matthew now shows us that here in these first 16 verses, I think, by two contrasting pairs. First, Jesus and the high priest Caiaphas. And the second contrasting pair, this unnamed woman who pours ointment on Jesus and the alabaster flask and Judas.

[6 : 39] You see, these opening 16 verses are a majestically woven narrative that highlight the love of Christ and highlight the love of this unnamed woman for Christ over and against the hatred of Caiaphas and Judas for Jesus. And in that way, then contrast their response to the cross. I don't know if you noticed as we read it how the narrative doesn't sort of demand movement of one place to the other.

We're with Jesus and his disciples. Just look down at your Bibles. We're with Jesus and his disciples, verse 1 and 2. Then the camera cuts and all of a sudden we're in the palace of the high priest. Then it cuts back to Bethany and the house of Simon the leper there on the side of the Mount of Olives or near the Mount of Olives. Then at the end of that, what, in verse 14, it cuts back to Judas with the high priest betraying Jesus for 30 pieces of silver. You can imagine it as a TV drama, just kind of cutting, moving from scene to scene, building the tension. And I think Matthew is putting all this together to show us how the cross is casting its shadow over everything, into everyone's heart, and indeed then showing us the response it should bring from us. So our first point this evening, the cross and the high priest, or the cross and the high priest's heart. Let's just set the scene again.

These two scenes here, verses 1 and 2 and verses 3 to 5. Verse 1 and 2, Jesus has just finished teaching. He's likely still on the Mount of Olives. And he says to his disciples that in two days the Passover is coming, and the Son of Man will be delivered up to be crucified. Remember, the Son of Man is Jesus' favorite kind of way or most common way of talking about himself. So just kind of hold that screen in your mind. Do the split screen thing. Hold that. And as we've just done, look at the scene next to it. Chief priests, elders of the people are in the palace of the high priest Caiaphas.

And do you notice the words there? Stealth, that they're plotting. They're going to kill Jesus, but not during the festival, they say, lest there be an uproar. And I think Matthew intends for us to just kind of hold those two scenes together in our minds, but pause them there. What do they have in common? Well, Jesus says he's going to die. And Caiaphas and the elders say that Jesus is going to die.

The death of Jesus now seems like a sure and certain thing. What do they both have in common? Jesus is going to die. But notice the key difference. What's the difference? Well, the difference is when. Jesus says the Passover is in two days and the Son of Man will be delivered up. And so this is very likely the Tuesday of Jesus' final week before his death. It's the Tuesday. It's two days until the Thursday when Jesus is arrested and tried in the evening and crucified on Good Friday. Two days, says Jesus, says Jesus, till I'm delivered. But what do the chief priests say? Verse five. Did you notice?

[9 : 51] They say, not during the festival, not during Passover, lest it cause an uproar, a riot as he's killed. So they're really saying maybe a week, ten days, or even two weeks. And so the question, I think Matthew is just wanting to begin to sort of prise open at the start here, is who's in charge of these events? Who's in charge? The Lord Jesus or Caiaphas, the high priest and the elders? The Lord Jesus, the one who so far in Matthew has calmed the storm, walked on water, cast out demons, overcome the devil, cleansed the temple, been transfigured on the mountain whose every word has proved true, or the scheming, plotting Caiaphas? Will Jesus die in two days or be delivered over in two days or in two weeks after the festival? Now we're going to see, are we not? And it's very obvious who is in charge, what the right answer is. But I think Matthew just wants to start this section as a reminder to his readers, namely his Jewish readers, that Jesus' authority extends even to his death.

Jesus' authority extends even to his laying down his life for our salvation. He is the king for the world to bow to, and he does not set aside or lose his authority or set aside his authority somehow when he's betrayed and crucified. As Jesus heads to the cross, he has not lost control of what's going on.

No, in all of the events, in all of the weeks ahead for us as this is preached, and we read through slowly through Matthew's gospel here, we're not to lose sight of his crown and scepter in the passion narrative, in the story of his sufferings. And so two brief comments on that. First, I think this is important because in every generation there are always spurious claims about the nature of Jesus' death.

Oh Jesus, it was a wasted life, cut short by accident. Oh, it was the father mistreating the son somehow, and Jesus went unwillingly. These sorts of things raise their head in every generation.

But to those, and much more, Matthew, indeed most importantly, Jesus says, no, two days, the son of man, that is Jesus, will willingly go to the cross and be crucified. In charge, willing, in total control of what's about to happen, here is the king for the world to bow to, willingly going to die.

[12 : 40] But there's a second thing that Matthew draws out about the cross and the high priest, and I think that is what's in their heart. What kind of men do we have here in Jesus and in Caiaphas? And in order to understand some of that, I think we need to press into what kind of year it was. Verse 2, it's Passover time, the Passover festival, the time when many gathered in Jerusalem to celebrate and feast and remember the deliverance of God's people from Egypt, and the blood of the lamb that was put over the doors of the homes of God's people, so their firstborn sons were protected from the plague.

It's a time to remember God's deliverance, to remember his rescue. And in order to celebrate it, people would gather in Jerusalem and purify themselves before the feast.

And so what do we have here in verse 3? Verse 3 is a sinister scene, a very dark scene, very wicked scene. Because in verse 3, we have the chief priests, the elders, the high priest, Caiaphas, gathering in the palace of the high priest, two days before Passover, likely purifying themselves or on the verge of purifying themselves for this festival. But what are they doing?

Scheming, plotting, planning murder. It's a scheme that makes the gathering of kind of a mafia family look like a picnic in the park, right? Taken by stealth and murder Jesus. In other words, what we have in those few verses 3, 4, and 5 in the palace of the high priest is this, we have men who are so concerned with outward cleanliness, but they are inwardly wrought in, gathering, come to Jerusalem to celebrate this festival, and oh, they want to be clean. But what are they plotting to do? To kill the Son of God, to kill the Son of Man, to kill Jesus. I had a family member once who said they bought an apple from a store for their lunch. It was one of these meal deal things, picked up their apple. This was years ago, but it really stayed with me. I never really buy apples for lunch from the store anymore like that. Looked great on the outside, nice and shiny, bought it, bit into it, full of maggots, absolutely full of maggots, rotten to the core. Friends, that is these men. That is Caiaphas, rotten to the heart. What does Caiaphas want? Rid of Jesus and an easy life. Rid of Jesus and an easy life. Let's kill Jesus, but we don't want to do it when everyone's here. There could be a riot. No, let's have an easy life. I want to take another life for my good. Oh, what a heart. What darkness, what lostness, what sin, what evil. But what about Jesus' heart? What about Jesus' heart?

Jesus' heart is a heart where he is going to what? Lay down his life willingly for others. You see, it's Passover. He's going to die when? He's going to die at Passover. And I think this is Matthew kind of beginning to hint here that this is the Passover lamb, the one to whom all other Passover lambs pointed to. What did we open with those words from J.C. Ryle? He is what? The lamb slain who takes away the sin of the world. He is going to be the great sacrifice to which all other sacrifices in the Old Testament have long pointed. Here we see how the blood was shared to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. Friends, that is Jesus' heart, a life laid down to save sinners.

[16 : 45] Another way to view this, and we'll think about this in the next part too, is to see this bit of the narrative as a story of loves. What's Caiaphas' love? Self-love. Kill him at the right time for my good when it suits me. Be rid of Jesus. What about Jesus? A total, complete, selfless love for others.

The king, the Passover lamb who willingly goes to the cross to rescue his people. And what kind of people does he rescue? Sinners like us, sinners like you and me. Because where do we find Jesus after all this? If we just look down a little bit, where do we find Jesus after all this? We find him, do we not, in verse 6? In the home of Simon the leper, of a leper. Jesus, after speaking to the disciples, goes to Bethany to the house of a leper. That is the house of an outcast. Someone who carries likely more stigma than some of the politicians and members of the royal family that we're seeing on our TV screens at the moment. Jesus goes there because they're broken. And these people know they need a Savior.

Friends, do you know that your life is in need of a Savior? Do you know the brokenness of your heart? Do you know you're spiritually sick? But do you ever think, oh, if he knew my heart, if they knew my heart, they wouldn't come near. Jesus comes near. Jesus comes near. Jesus comes to us and calls us and will go to the cross for us. You see, we're seeing, are we not, the gospel according to cancel culture playing out on our TV screens and in our newspapers right now? Well, dear friends, as we gather through the passion narrative here, welcome to the gospel according to the Lord Jesus, healing for the broken, dining with the unclean, laying down his life so there can be full and complete an utter redemption for all who come to him. And in this way then, I think Matthew is kind of setting up here and contrasting these men, not just as Jesus and the high priest, but as, if you like, two high priests, one called Caiaphas, one called Jesus, one who would send a man to a cross, one who would willingly go to the cross, one who would sacrifice another so that he would have an easier time of it, one who would sacrifice himself for our salvation, one who had all the self-righteousness and rottenness in his heart, one who was truly righteous, but who would become sin on the cross that we could become the righteousness of God. So, dear friends, who do we follow? Who do we worship?

Do we not praise God for the glorious high priest, the sacrificial lamb, the Lord Jesus, who out of love would willingly go to the cross for us? Matthew then goes on to show how the shadow of the cross, as it were, plays out in the lives of two followers of Jesus, two disciples, kind of, one is a capital D, disciple, Judas, right? Judas, but kind of lowercase d, disciples, two followers of Jesus, and he compares and contrasts them as well. So, let's look now at this unnamed woman and Judas, Judas, and that brings us to our second point, the cross and the disciple's heart, the cross and the disciple's heart. Now, as we asked with the last two scenes, what holds these two scenes together? What holds Jesus in the house of Simon the leper at Bethany and this woman putting ointment over Jesus and the scene with Judas going to betray Jesus? What holds them together?

Father, well, what do you think? What do they have in common? They're both about money. They're both about money. She takes very expensive ointments. Verse 9, we read it's worth a large sum of money, perfume, ointment. This same scene is retold in John's gospel. He says it's a year's wage, the worth of this perfume. So, I don't know what an average year's salary is now, 30, 35,000 pounds. It's worth serious money, this perfume. She pours it on Jesus. And in verse 14 to 16, well, Judas goes to the chief priests, and it's also to do with money, less money, maybe a quarter or a third of a year's salary.

[21 : 23] And he takes 30 pieces of silver to betray Jesus and to help the chief priests, to help the high priests, the archivists, arrest him. But already, although you can see the commonality as both scenes are about money, that's where the difference ends. For you can see that this woman gives, Judas lavishes upon Jesus. She holds nothing back to bless Jesus. Judas, greed, gain, whatever he can take.

She gives, he takes. And I think the question that Matthew just begins to prize up for us here, for them, for us, is what is Jesus worth? What is Jesus worth? What's he worth to us?

Everything has value, doesn't it? Homes go up and down in price in the housing market, cars, football players now ever more expensive by every transfer window. The price of gold rises and falls. But what is Jesus worth? Well, let's ask what he's worth to this unnamed woman, and let's ask what he's worth to Judas. And then let's think, what's he worth to us?

Well, to this woman, I think we're to understand that Jesus is worth everything to her, everything to her that she has given, if you like, everything here. Now, why do I say that? I say that because I think we can see that her motivation of part of what she sees here in anointing Jesus is to prepare him for his death. The shadow of the cross is kind of all across this scene, and she wants to anoint Jesus to prepare him, his body, for death and burial. So she does this, doesn't she? She pours this perfume on Jesus. Verse 8, the disciples say, what a waste. It should have been given to the poor.

Jesus says, no, it's beautiful. Why? Well, the poor you'll always have, but you won't always have me. That's Jesus saying we're to love him more than the poor. It doesn't mean we don't care for the poor, we don't want to give. But no, Jesus is worth the most. We're to love him above all. And then in verse 12 there, he tells the disciples, she has done this to prepare me for burial. Now, some people you read on this are split on, is she doing more than she knows? But I don't think so. Jesus says she's preparing my body to die. I think she knows what's coming. You see, in Jesus' day, bodies would have been or had ointment or perfume poured on them after death to prepare them for burial, but not criminals. And so Jesus is about to die a criminal's death. And so here she clearly loves her master, loves her Lord, loves Jesus, and knowing the cross is coming says, let's get you ready. You see, I think in some sense she sees that the cross is beckoning, so she wants to show Jesus her love for him. She sees Jesus' love for us, that he would go to the cross. And so she says, I'm going to extravagantly, lavishly, lavishly pour out my love for you. You see, what are we worth to Jesus? He would go to the cross for us in our salvation. He went to die to ransom and redeem us. And seeing that, knowing that, she gives her most costly thing to bless and ready Jesus. One commentator says this, that this woman in this moment is picking up her cross and following Jesus. Extravagant, costly love in response to, because of his extravagant, costly love that Jesus has shown us. It's echoing the words of David that were read for us earlier in 2 Samuel. He buys this plot of land and says, no, no, I don't want it for free because

[25 : 35] I won't give back to God something that costs nothing. Costly love, extravagant love, what we want to give to him. And what's Jesus' response to all this? Verse 13, wherever this gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will also be told in memory of her. And dear friends, did those words not prove true? That is happening here this evening, is it not? 2,000 years after these events in Bonacord this evening. We're speaking a different language to what they spoke.

We live in a different time, a different age, a different nation. But this act of devotion, of love, is being heard and remembered this evening because she loved Jesus above all.

Well, what of Judas before thinking? What of us? Well, how does verse 14 start? How does verse 14 start? One of the twelve. Here is one of Jesus' closest followers, a kind of capital D disciple, if you like.

He's been with Jesus for the past three years of ministry. Judas has heard the sermons of Jesus. He's seen the miracles of Jesus. He saw Jesus cast out demons. He's eaten with Jesus, walked with Jesus, talked with Jesus, prayed with Jesus. He's seen storms, calm, children healed. And here, one of the twelve goes off to betray Jesus. We can never get over, I don't think, the sheer wickedness and evil of it. And not only that, but I think there's something else as well going on in Judas's heart.

I think we can assume that Judas is with Jesus in the house at Bethany. He's there, and his voice is added to the chorus of disciples who say, isn't this a waste? And seeing this valuable perfume poured out on Jesus, hearing him say he's going to be buried, Judas goes off to betray him. You see, what is Jesus worth to Judas? Nothing. Thirty pieces of silver, a few months' salary. It's the sum that owners would pay if an ox, an animal, if an ox had gored a slave to death. Jesus is worth no more than a slave.

[27 : 50] If Jesus is going to die, thinks Judas, well, I better make a little bit of money out of it. Greet, gain, self-glory. You see, the cross and the kind of king that Jesus is who would go to a cross has made Judas want to betray Jesus so that he would be killed, and he rejects him. Remember, the way of Jesus and the way of his disciples is cross, then crown. But if no cross, if not the cross, then no crown. Judas clearly wants to skip right to the crown, to the money, but in doing so betrays his savior. It's shocking, and it's awful. And for us, then, it surely has to be a warning to us, to you, to me. Is Judas not a warning? Oh, the blindness and deception of sin that he walked and talked and was with Jesus and yet betrayed him. Is the Lord Jesus just someone we're wanting to take from? Are we likely to reject, to walk away from him when the cross-carrying comes? When the shame of following a crucified savior, a crucified king sets in? Friends, we follow a crucified king.

He's come. He's not come to make us rich on this earth or to fulfill all our political dreams. No, he's come to die to save sinners. And this woman, this unnamed woman, I think she has to be an example to us, does she not? She gave lavishly, extravagantly, costly, because she knows that Jesus is of infinite worth. Dear friends, do you know that this evening? That there is nothing more precious in all heaven and earth than the Lord Jesus. And so, with the cross looming, with just a number of days before Jesus is crucified here, as we think about the Lord Jesus and these two people and their response to him and the kind of king he is, let me ask, does he have your heart? What is Jesus worth to you? Does he have your heart? Does he have all of it? For truly our savior is so great, his love so abounding in going to the cross, that the words of the hymn we're about to sing ring absolutely true. Where the whole realm of nature mine, that where an offering far too small, love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all. Let's pray before we sing.

Lord Jesus, we thank you that you are one who is utterly sovereign, king of all the ages, one who willingly laid down his life. You set your face to the cross, that you would die, that you would be the great high priest, the great high priest who would make atonement for our sin, the great high priest who right now is in heaven praying for us. We praise you that you are our great high priest, you are the Passover lamb who takes away the sin of the world. And so, in response to your great love, to the great salvation we have in you, may we seek to give and to live all our lives giving back to your glory.

Indeed, where the whole world ours would be an offering too small to give for so great and awesome and splendid you are. But indeed, what you have given us in our lives, what you have given us to steward on this earth. May we seek to always live, to give them in worship and in offering back to you, that we would live for your glory and that we would exalt you above all. And we ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.