

Waste or Worship

Matthew 26:1-16

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Today is the Sanctity of Human Life Sunday. Sanctity of Human Life Sunday is a call to remember that every life—born and unborn, young and old, healthy and vulnerable—is precious in the eyes of God.

Friends, we live in a culture that often values convenience over conviction and silence over courage. The question is: How do we, as a church and Jesus' disciples, stand courageously for the sanctity of human life? How do we champion the dignity of human life in a way that reflects both truth and love? Proverbs 31:8-9 says,

Open your mouth for the mute, for the rights of all who are destitute. ⁹ Open your mouth, judge righteously, and defend the rights of the poor and needy.

This text calls us to speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, like the unborn and the elderly. It calls us to judge rightly and to defend the rights of the poor and needy. These verses are not merely suggestions but a call to wise, godly action. They remind us that our courage is not about self-righteousness but about being the voice for the voiceless, the defender of the defenseless.

Courage does not mean aggression; it means conviction. It does not mean arrogance; it means compassion. Courage is rooted in the confidence that God's truth is unchanging, His love is unshakable, and His purposes will prevail because of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection from the dead.

This morning we are going to work through Matthew 26:1-16. This text will challenge us to live out a courageous love for Christ.

Today we move from Matthew 25 to Matthew 26. We are now in the last few days of Jesus' life. Matthew sets up Jesus' last days by telling us the story of how a woman anointed Jesus with a very expensive perfume or ointment called *nard*.

Before we move into the narrative, I want to clarify three literary issues in this narrative. I don't want this message to sound like a seminary class, but I have to explain these things to you.

The first literary issue is the literary structure of vv. 1-16. Verses 1-5 and vv. 14-16 function like bookends to the narrative. Verses 1-5 tell us that the religious leaders want to kill Jesus. At the end, vv. 14-16, we see that Judas sold Jesus out to the religious leaders for thirty pieces of silver. In verses 6-13, sandwiched between the religious leaders' plan to kill Jesus is the story of the woman who anointed Jesus.

Remember, Matthew doesn't always follow a precise chronology of Jesus' life and ministry. Here is one of those cases. While v. 2 is correct, they are only *two days* away from the Passover. John's Gospel tells us that the woman who anointed Jesus actually occurred *six days* before the Passover. John wrote with precise chronology, but Matthew didn't always do that.

So, *why did Matthew place this story where he did?* Matthew placed this story in between the Pharisees planning to kill Jesus to show us one more time that Jesus' death on the cross was according to God's plan. For the joy set before Him, Jesus would endure the cross and give His life as a ransom for sinners. Jesus' life was not taken—it was given.

Here's the second literary issue. I want you to notice *the divine irony* in this text. Let me explain what I mean. Have you ever seen those TV shows, movies, or read books where you have two actions occurring simultaneously? Sometimes, you will have a split screen showing the events occurring. This is kind of what we have here in these verses.

While Jesus was teaching His disciples about “*the last days*” on the Mount of Olives in Matthew 24-25, verses 1-5 tell us the chief priests and the elders gathered at the palace of the high priest, making their plans for Jesus’ last days.

Remember, Matthew placed the anointing of Jesus where he did to show us that what may look like evil men were in control, was actually, God providentially governing all events. Jesus would willingly give His life as a ransom for His people. His life was given, not taken.

The third issue we need to clarify is the identity of the woman who anointed Jesus. All four Gospels record a woman anointing Jesus, but there are some differences. Matthew and Mark record that a woman came in with an alabaster jar of pure nard and anointed Jesus. John records the same story, but he tells us that it was Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus.

However, Luke’s Gospel differs from these accounts. Luke says the woman who anointed Jesus was a sinner. He meant she was a prostitute. Also, Luke’s account occurred in the house of a Pharisee. The similarities in the stories are that both women brought an alabaster flask of nard, broke it, and poured it on Jesus.

Scholars tell us that it seems like the Gospels record two different anointings of Jesus because there were two different anointings. Matthew 26, Mark 14, and John 12 record Mary’s anointing in Bethany at the house of Simon the Leper. Luke 7 records the anointing of Jesus by a different woman while Jesus dined with the Pharisees. She was most likely Mary Magdalene, from whom Jesus cast out seven demons.

Now that we’ve clarified these issues, let’s walk through the narrative. Verses 6-7 give us the setting and tell us that Mary anointed Jesus. The remaining verses tell us the reaction to her anointing Jesus with the perfume.

Let’s read vv. 6-7 again because they are loaded with things we need to unpack:

Now when Jesus was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, ⁷ 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.

Here’s how Mark 14:3 records the event:

And while he was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, as he was reclining at table, a woman came with an alabaster flask of ointment of pure nard, very costly, and she broke the flask and poured it over his head.

Finally, just to get the full picture, John 12:1-3 records:

Six days before the Passover, Jesus therefore came to Bethany, where Lazarus was, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. ² So they gave a dinner for him there. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those reclining with him at table. ³ Mary therefore took a pound of expensive ointment made from pure nard, and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped his feet with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.

There are details in vv. 6-7 that would raise the eyebrows of the men who were in that room. First, v. 6 tells us that they were in Bethany, but they were not in Lazarus’ house. They were in *Simon the leper’s* house.

Most likely, at some point in His ministry, Jesus had healed Simon. Yet, he was not known as “*Simon, the former leper.*” He was still known as “*Simon, the leper.*”

Culturally and socially, there was a stigmatism attached to lepers and even former lepers. Hanging out with former lepers and going to their houses was still not culturally and socially acceptable. So, if you cross that line, you might be ostracized.

The next cultural and social issue we need to consider is that these men were *reclining at the table* and eating together. Martha, as usual, was serving while the men talked. Then Mary came into the room, but she was not serving. She came in to anoint Jesus with the *nard*.

Here's the point. Culturally and socially, it was okay for women to be in the room serving, but to come in and approach Jesus in front of a group of men to anoint Him was extremely unacceptable culturally and socially.

We know that Jesus interacted with women differently than people normally did in the first century. He didn't follow cultural and social protocol. He didn't care what people thought. He cared about people.

However, in this situation, Mary was the one who broke cultural and social protocol. She publicly engaged Jesus in front of a room full of men. This was a bold and courageous move on her part. It was a risky move for her to come to Jesus.

The actions she had done up to this point were enough to shock the men in the room and get her into trouble socially. They could have scolded her right there and been within social protocol. However, she did one more thing, which completely pushed them over the edge.

The last part of v. 7 tells us she anointed Jesus' head [and most likely His feet, too] with a very expensive perfume or ointment called *nard*. Here's the deal with *Nard*. *Nard* was an incredibly costly perfume. To us, this seems like it would not have been a big deal, but in that day and time, it was a massive deal.

Consider this: *Nard* was a popular perfume. It was used in both the Old and New Testaments. It was an oil that had a strong, distinctive aroma that would cling to skin and hair for many days.

It also was used for medical purposes. It was a sedative. It could help people sleep better. It was used as an anti-inflammatory. You didn't have ibuprofen or prednisone back then. If you could afford it, you used *Nard*. Listen, your *essential oils* had nothing on *nard*.

Finally, it was used for burial preparation. So, if you have some *Nard* on hand you saved it your whole life. Then, when you died, it was used to anoint your body to overpower the smell of decaying flesh.

Nard was also symbolic of the very best of products. In ancient cultures, *nard* symbolized the very best. They didn't say something was cool back then; they said it was "*nard*." I'm just kidding. It was the GOAT. They didn't say that, but you get the idea.

Bottom line: *Nard* was a sweet-smelling perfume, medicine, and a symbol of wealth poured into one small flask or bottle. It was worth a year's wages. So, whatever a year's salary is for you, imagine holding it in a small container.

Matthew simply tells us that the *nard* was worth *a large sum of money*. Mark's Gospel tells us it was worth more than *three hundred denarii*. Three hundred denarii was equivalent to about a year's wages back then. So, think of what a year's wages is for you. Now, think of that year's wages in a liquid form and pouring it onto Jesus' head and feet. It's a stunning thought.

But here's one more thought. Women didn't own property that day. So, where did Mary get a perfume worth a year's wages? Most likely, it was her inheritance left to her by her family. If it was left to her, then she was supposed to take the *nard* and sell some of it when she needed money for living expenses.

It is also possible (but less likely) that she was left a lump sum of money to live on for the rest of her life. If this was the case, it means she took *all of a large portion* of her inheritance and bought the *nard*. If this was her inheritance, and I think it was, then what she did was give Jesus everything she had. It was a remarkably extravagant act of worship for her to anoint Jesus with the *nard*.

For the disciples, and especially Judas, what she did was too much. It was too extravagant to pour this perfume on Jesus. In vv. 8-9 they respond:

*And when the disciples saw it, they were indignant, saying, "Why this waste?"⁹
For this could have been sold for a large sum and given to the poor."*

Just picture the scene of the disciples watching in disbelief as Mary pours out this expensive perfume on Jesus' head. They begin to whisper among themselves,

Waste! Waste! Why this waste?

Brothers and sisters, these men were offended at this extravagant act of love and worship of Jesus. So, they spiritualized her act of worship by scolding her and telling Jesus it would have been better to sell the perfume and give the money to the poor.

It is a reasonable objection. God wants us to take care of the poor. In the previous chapter in Matthew 25, Jesus even said that one of the primary ways we show our love for Him is by caring for the poor. The disciples looked at the expensive perfume running down Jesus' hair, on His feet, His clothes, and most likely onto the floor, and they began to lean over to one another and whisper,

"Waste. Waste. What a waste!"

However, in vv. 9-12, Jesus quickly put this act of worship in perspective when He reminded them that He was about to die. He said to them:

*Why do you trouble the woman? For she has done a beautiful thing to me.¹¹
For you always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me.¹² In
pouring this ointment on my body, she has done it to prepare me for burial.*

To put her act of love and worship in perspective, He reminded them of the cross, where His blood would poured out for sinners. He pointed them to the supreme act of love He would soon give. Sure, the pouring out of this perfume was an extravagant act, but it would pale in comparison to the pouring out of the infinite, divine blood of the Son of God on the cross.

Finally, in v. 13, Jesus drove a dagger through their petty, shortsighted comments:

*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.*

Jesus said the story of Mary's extravagant love and worship of Him would be told wherever the gospel is preached. This is really the key to the whole narrative in vv. 6-13. Sure, telling this story was to honor Mary, but the main point is to show us the glory of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Friends, Mary, got it. The disciples didn't understand that Jesus must die, but Mary did. She spent time at the feet of Jesus, listening and learning from Him. She knew that going to Jerusalem meant Jesus would die. She knew she must seize the moment because this may be the last time she could serve Jesus. So, she gave Him her best. She gave Him her all. She broke open the alabaster jar, poured it on His head and feet, and wiped His feet with her hair. She demonstrated extravagant love and worship of Jesus, which should leave us stunned and humbled. Jesus called what she did a beautiful thing. *Friends . . . Mary was sold out to Jesus.* Her act of worship challenges us to be sold out for Jesus.

However, the narrative concludes in vv. 14-16, with Judas going to the religious leaders and *selling Jesus out* for thirty pieces of silver. His action was in complete contrast to Mary's. *She was sold out to Jesus, but Judas sold Jesus out.*

Now, let's apply this beautiful story of love and worship. Interestingly, Mary never says anything in this narrative, yet her act of worship is loud and lasting.

Think about her act of worship this way. In this story, we hear two voices. We hear the *commending voice* of Jesus and the *condemning voice* of the disciples. Friends, we still hear these two voices today.

Let me show you what I mean. In God's word and by His Spirit, we hear the *commending voice* of Jesus as we worship Him. However, we hear the *condemning voice* of culture, society, and perhaps even in your family because you worship Jesus. The question is, which voice will you listen to?

Friends, Mary's act of love and worship is an example for us. Her bold, courageous, and extravagant love and worship of Jesus should inspire us to follow in her footsteps and resist the *condemning voices* of culture, society, and even our family (if necessary) so that we enjoy the *commending voice* of the Spirit of God. So, with that in mind, let's consider how Mary displayed her love and worship of Jesus.

I. Courageous Love. Mary's courageous love for Jesus overcame the cultural and social pressures of her day. Her courageous love moved her to enter the house of a man known as a leper. Her courageous love moved her to enter a room of men when she was supposed to remain outside and in her place. Mary loved Jesus, and she didn't care what anyone thought.

How about you? Does your love for Christ give you the courage to stand for Jesus? I'm not saying run roughshod over people. Remember, Mary didn't say a word when she entered the room. She simply served Jesus.

Friends, are there cultural, social, or family contexts in your life where you are expected not to talk about Jesus or display your love for Christ? We live in a world where it is often out of line to speak about Jesus. If we cross the line in those contexts, we might be canceled or ostracized.

For some of us to display our love for Jesus, we will have to do some things or say things that may be unacceptable culturally, socially, or even in our own families.

I remember when I answered the call to ministry. I decided to change my major. I was in the last year of my accounting degree, but I made the decision to stop pursuing that degree, change schools, move to the dead center of the state of Texas, and pursue a degree in ministry. I could hear the voice of the disciples in my friends and family saying, *"Waste. What a waste. Following Jesus at this point—waste."* Have you ever heard those voices in your life when you decide to obey the Lord?

Think about this: It is Sanctity of Human Life Sunday, where we are reminded that God values human life. We live in a culture that loves death, and to speak up for life may be costly. It may be costly for you to speak up for the unborn in your family. It may be costly in your job to stand up for the vulnerable and those who have no voice. It may be costly to support Obria Medical Clinic here in Ames. However, if we follow Mary's example of courageous love, we will find a way to speak up and stand up for the unborn and vulnerable. There is an insert in your Service Guide with ideas of how you can display courageous love that will create a culture of life. Warning! If you do any of these things there may be those who whisper,

"Waste, waste, what a waste of time. What a waste of breath."

When I was doing my counseling degree, I remember the interaction I had in class one day. I had taken a year off from school because I had gotten burned out. When I came back, it was all new people in the program and most all of them were younger than me. I vividly remember one class when we discussed abortion and how most of the class was okay with it. Well, I spoke up and said it was a sin and abortion is murder. You could have heard a pin drop, and some of their faces were shocked.

I talked to some of the students after the class, and many of them thanked me for speaking up, but some of them wouldn't speak to me for a while. One young lady said to me,

"Michael, when you came back to school, we thought you were a cool guy when but when you said abortion was a sin and murder, we thought you were crazy."

When she said that, I could hear the voices of the disciples, *"Waste, waste, what a waste."*

Brothers and sisters, there are many other contexts in life where you must be prepared to hear the voices of the disciples whispering, *"Waste."* If you love Jesus with all of your heart, soul, mind, and strength, you may hear the voices of those you love and respect whisper, *"Waste."*

The next thing we learn from Mary's example is extravagant worship.

II. Extravagant Worship: Mary displayed an extravagant love for Jesus when she gave her all for Him. She sold out for Him. She trusted Him with her life and financial future.

What would have happened if she had withheld her gift? The most obvious thing is that we wouldn't be talking about her in the context of the gospel. But, Mary got it. She understood that Jesus was about to give His all for her, so she gave her all for Him. She understood that Jesus was giving His life to save hers.

So, let's put her gift into perspective. What if you had saved up a year's wages and then you found out that there was a missionary who needed a house or car or something like that in order to share the gospel where they were serving, would you give it? You had the money and believed the Lord wanted you to give it—could you? Would you?

Listen, don't hear what I'm not saying. I'm not saying bankrupt your family, give your retirement away, or empty your savings account. Listen, by all means, be wise with your finances. Follow the Dave Ramsey principles if you can and pay off your debt. I'm not saying you should bankrupt your family to give to the church or missions. *However, I am asking you to consider what extravagant worship might look like in your life.*

I don't know what an extravagant love for Jesus would look like for you. But, if you begin to love Jesus with your time, talent, and treasure extravagantly, you will hear the voice of some people whisper,

"Waste. What a waste of time! What a waste of talent. Giving to the church and missions, what a waste of money! He/she is so intelligent. They could have done so much more than go overseas and teach the Bible. They could have done so much more than teach students or youth or children the Bible. What a waste."

Friends, Mary's extravagant worship of Jesus overcame cultural and social expectations. When you love Jesus this way, you become courageous and extravagant for Christ.

At the end of his life, the Apostle Paul said his life was like a drink offering that had been poured out for Jesus. When your life is poured out for Jesus, you will make an impact on others' lives.

Sure, you may hear the condemning whisper, *"What a waste."* But you will also hear the *commending voice* of Jesus loudly saying,

"Well done My good and faithful servant. You have done a beautiful thing for Me. You have been faithful over a little. I will make you ruler over much. Enter into the joy of your Master."

Conclusion: If you love Jesus like Mary did, you won't have your life put in the Bible. You won't be immortalized in Scripture. However, you will leave a lasting impact on future generations in your church and your family.

You may begin a legacy in your family and church where other disciples look back at your life and remind others of how you loved Jesus courageously and extravagantly. The next generation will remember you because you will have pointed them to the Savior whose love was poured out on the cross to save them.

You won't be able to take credit for that legacy. You see it is the pouring out of the infinitely costly blood of Jesus for you on the cross that purchased your salvation. The Jesus' gift of grace and love to you is why you love Jesus. His courageous, extravagant love for you is why we love Him courageously and extravagantly.