

# Palm Sunday

*“Say to the daughter of Zion, ‘Behold, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a beast of burden.’”  
(Matthew 21:5 ESV)*

*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.” (Matthew 26:3–5 ESV)*

## **Jesus Anointed At Bethany**

**April 14<sup>th</sup>, 2019**

**Matthew 26:6-16**

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### **Introduction:**

Good morning church! I want to invite you to open your Bibles this morning to Matthew 26:6; that’s on page 831 in your pew Bibles. You’ve been hearing me say for the last couple of weeks that this little mini-series we’ve been doing is really just an expanded version of what we usually talk about on Palm Sunday. Well today is ACTUALLY Palm Sunday and so today is the perfect day to look at a story that is in our Bibles in order to prepare us to properly understand and appreciate the significance of Jesus’ death upon the cross.

This is the story of Jesus’ anointing, by Mary at Bethany. Hear now the Word of the Lord, beginning at verse 6 of chapter 25.

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. 8 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.” 10 But Jesus, aware of this, 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. 13 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.” 14 Then one of the twelve, whose name was Judas Iscariot, went to the chief priests 15 and said, “What will you give me if I deliver him over to you?” And they paid him thirty pieces of silver. 16 And from that moment he sought an opportunity to betray him. (Matthew 26:6–16 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God!

Well of course, this is a very well known story because it is told three different times in our New Testaments so if you are a Bible reader – and if you use the RMM Bible Reading Plan which has you reading the whole New Testament TWICE every 12 months then you will have read some version of this story 30 times in the last 5 years. And quite likely on one of those occasions you will have noticed that John provides a number of specific details that neither Mark nor Matthew felt it necessary to share. John tells us that it was Martha who was serving the meal – we might have guessed that – and John tells us that it was Mary who poured the oil over the body of Jesus. And whereas Mark and Matthew say that the DISCIPLES were upset, John tells us that Judas was the most upset of all. Listen to how John puts it; he says:

But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (he who was about to betray him), said, 5 “Why was this ointment not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?” 6 He said this, not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief, and having charge of the moneybag he used to help himself to what was put into it. (John 12:4–6 ESV)

So John tells us WHO was most upset and he even tells us WHY Judas was so upset. He was a thief! And he used to help himself to the money in the common bag. Matthew of course, implies as much when he tells us that directly after this event Judas went to the chief priests and agreed to hand Jesus over to them for the paltry sum of 30 pieces of silver – the amount the Old Testament specifies as the redemption price of a slave.

Charles Spurgeon as he often does, puts his finger directly upon the main, preaching point of the passage. He says:

“The amount agreed upon, *thirty pieces of silver*, was the price of a slave; and showed how little value the chief priests set upon Jesus, and also revealed the greed of Judas in selling his master for so small a sum. Yet many have sold Jesus for a less price than Judas received; a smile or a sneer has been sufficient to induce them to betray their Lord.”<sup>1</sup>

Well, leave it to Charles Spurgeon to lead us directly to the point of the text. This story is asking a very simple question: **how much is Jesus worth to you?**

That’s what the story is about and that’s why the Evangelists have put it here. They want you to think about this BEFORE you consider the body of Jesus Christ upon the cross. This is the most important question in the world and not everyone will answer it the same way. We see that in the story. Mary gets it right, the disciples are still in process and Judas misses the mark entirely.

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Spurgeon, *Commentary On Matthew* (Edinburgh: The Banner Of Truth Trust, 2013), 398.

That's the whole spectrum right there, isn't it?

Mary of course is the example that we are supposed to follow. Jesus says that he wants the story of her estimation and response to be remembered wherever the story of the Gospel is to be told – so there can be no doubt, Mary is the one who got it right.

She thinks that Jesus is worth a great deal.

Matthew says that the perfume she poured over him was VERY EXPENSIVE; John tells us that it was actually worth 300 denarii or roughly \$60,000 in today's terms. It was probably a family heirloom or it may even have been Mary's retirement fund. They didn't have RRSP's back in those days and so they put their money into moveable commodities such as gold or costly oils. Either way, this was a remarkably extravagant gesture – filled with faith, love and adoration and it demonstrates – very tangibly the worth that Mary has assigned to the person and work of Jesus Christ.

Now, scholars argue amongst themselves as to HOW MUCH Mary really understood about who Jesus was and what he was about to do. Did she really understand that Jesus was God in the flesh? Did she really understand that he was about to offer his life as a ransom for sinners? Or did she just get lucky here or was she simply expressing gratitude for the miracle done for her brother Lazarus and was Jesus perhaps making more of her gesture than it deserved.

Hmm.

I think William Hendriksen is helpful here; he says:

“The fact should not be overlooked that Mary of Bethany was perhaps the best listener Jesus ever had.”<sup>2</sup>

There is that, isn't there? And so maybe Mary had heard some things that disciples had not heard – or had not heard properly. Maybe Mary had been thinking about what the raising of her brother from the dead SAID about the identity and mission of Jesus.

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<sup>2</sup> William Hendriksen, *The Gospel Of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1973), 901.

Of course we can't know EXACTLY what Mary knew, but what is obvious from the text is that Mary understood better than anyone else just how precious; just how valuable and just how worthy was the PRESENCE and the PERSON of Jesus Christ.

She knew that in Jesus God was doing something that would change the world. He was doing something that would RAISE THE DEAD – he was doing something that would FOREVER ALTER the human experience and that would in SOME WAY – SOME HOW – bring us home to God.

Mary got it right!

The disciples were still in process.

And Judas missed it entirely.

That's the story and it has been put here in your Bibles for a reason. As Spurgeon suggested, it means to send us on a course of personal evaluation. It means to invite us to ask a potentially life changing question and that question is this:

### **How Much Is Jesus Worth To You?**

I've often thought that the whole of life is really one long test to reveal the identity and location of our idols.

An idol is usually a GOOD thing that we treat like a GOD thing.

You see, we're all going to worship something; we're all going to identify something as THE MOST PRECIOUS AND VALUABLE THING IN THE WHOLE WORLD – so what will it be?

Mary has decided that it is Jesus.

Jesus is the MOST WORTHY THING – the MOST WORTHY PERSON in her universe – but I

think for most of us there is something or someone else in that position and so Jesus can often be found making fairly extravagant claims in order to assess how we have ordered our affections. Look for example at Matthew 10:37. This might be the most shocking thing that Jesus ever said; he said:

Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. (Matthew 10:37 ESV)

Are you hearing that?

Jesus is asking the question: Do you VALUE and ESTEEM and LOVE ME even more than your family?

### **1. More than your family?**

Now again – just as in the anointing story – if anyone else ever did or said the things that Jesus did and said we would think them quite bananas wouldn't we?

Think about it, if Billy Graham had come to our church just before he died and someone from the Board of Elders brought a jar of oil worth \$60,000 – bought with the church's money – and poured it all over Billy Graham while he sat in a chair up on the platform that would cause quite a stir wouldn't it? People would be outraged. We would inundated with angry letters: "Why wasn't that money given to the poor? Why didn't we send it to a missionary? We could have bought a brand new 4 wheel drive truck for the orphanage in MusaweNkosi with that money, why did we waste it by pouring it out over poor old Billy Graham?"

That would be a perfectly reasonable question wouldn't it – but Jesus is not Billy Graham. Jesus is not a GREAT MAN he is THE GOD MAN and that changes everything.

No one else can ever claim to be worthy of the sort of worship – or the sort of love – that Jesus claims to be worthy of – because only Jesus is God.

And so it is right – ACTUALLY - for Jesus to ask you whether or not you love him more than

you love your parents.

Or your spouse.

Or your children.

So do you?

Do I?

I think by FAR the most common form of idolatry in the church today is FAMILY IDOLATRY. We tend to value Jesus a great deal – but not quite as much as we value our children – or our marriages. Or even the peace and stability of our homes. And so as a result I think from time to time Jesus puts some pressure on those things – just to check, as it were for idolatry. Remember, life is a very long test designed in part to reveal where our idols have been hidden. When your parent dies or your marriage sours or when your child is diagnosed with cancer – does that EVENT somehow ECLIPSE your love for and joy in Jesus? Because if it does – well then, now you know where your idols are hidden.

You are still in process.

Rather like the disciples.

You haven't yet properly understood and esteemed the PERSON and WORK of Jesus.

## **2. More than your reputation?**

The New Testament also challenges us to consider whether or not we value Jesus more than our reputation and standing in the world. Jesus said that following him would put us on the margins of the culture. He said:

“If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. ... Remember the word that I said to you: ‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you.” (John 15:18–20 ESV)

Jesus was very clear that identifying with HIM and the things that he DID and SAID would inevitably place us on the margins of culture. Jesus was crucified OUTSIDE THE CITY and if you follow him then you are going to be on the OUTSIDE OF THE CITY as well. This is part of what it means to identify with Jesus. The author of Hebrews for example says:

So Jesus also suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through his own blood. 13 Therefore let us go to him outside the camp and bear the reproach he endured. (Hebrews 13:12–13 ESV)

Are you willing to do that?

That is one of the main questions that the Bible asks of us.

And the stakes are very high; Jesus said:

So everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven, 33 but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven. (Matthew 10:32–33 ESV)

Remember – all of life is one long test designed to discover our idols. God watches us as we make our way through the normal experiences of life to SEE HOW WE HAVE VALUED AND ESTEEMED his Son Jesus.

Judas valued him at 30 pieces of silver – the price of a slave – but as Spurgeon said – many people appear to have valued him at an even lesser price.

“a smile or a sneer has been sufficient to induce them to betray their Lord.”<sup>3</sup>

Do you value Jesus LESS than the approval of your friends and co-workers?

Do you value Jesus LESS THAN your professional accreditation?

Do you value Jesus LESS THAN your entrance into medical school?

Do you value Jesus LESS THAN your tax status as a church?

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<sup>3</sup> Charles Spurgeon, *Commentary On Matthew* (Edinburgh: The Banner Of Truth Trust, 2013), 398.

Those are the sorts of questions that LIFE WILL ASK US at some point or another along the way. And God is watching us to see how we will answer.

Thirdly, and coming right out of the text, I think this story is urging us to consider whether or not we value Jesus even more than our ministry to the poor.

### **3. More than your ministry to the poor?**

Now remember – idolatry is about treating a GOOD thing like a GOD thing – so I don't want you to hear this as an either or issue – anymore than we would want to think that Jesus is saying that to LOVE and ESTEEM him properly we have to NEGLECT our responsibilities to our parents. Just a few chapters ago in Matthew 15 Jesus REBUKED the scribes and the Pharisees for neglecting their parents – so this isn't about EITHER OR – this is about RIGHTLY ORDERING.

The disciples in this story ARE FRESHLY CONCERNED about ministry to the poor.

Now do you think that might be?

Because Jesus just finished giving a parable about the importance of ministering to the POOR among his disciples. Do you remember that? He literally said that heaven and hell hang in the balance here boys so PLEASE PAY VERY CLOSE ATTENTION.

Do you remember that?

He talked about how important it was to FEED the least of these and to give them water and to visit them in prison and then he said:

'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.' (Matthew 25:40 ESV)

And then to those who neglected this responsibility he said:

'Truly, I say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.' 46 And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life." (Matthew 25:45–46 ESV)



Ok, so Jesus has JUST PRIORITIZED ministry to the poor - particularly the poor among the disciples – in just about the most dramatic way possible. And so naturally the disciples are fired up about that – HEAVEN AND HELL ARE ON THE LINE HERE – so let’s get after ministry to the poor! And then Mary – who obviously wasn’t listening – goes on and WASTES a bunch of money worshipping Jesus that could have been spent on ministering to the poor.

Obviously Mary is in danger of going to hell.

That’s what they were thinking – and then Jesus said this:

“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. 13 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.” (Matthew 26:10–13 ESV)

Wow! So now we’re back to square one. Now the disciples don’t have a clue what is going on. Jesus has just rattled their cage and knocked all of their priorities out onto the floor.

Well, in part, we are being reminded that Mary was the best listener that Jesus ever had. Just a few days ago – during Passover Week – Jesus had had a very interesting conversation with a young lawyer – do you remember it? It’s in Matthew 22. The lawyer asked Jesus a question; he said:

“Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?” (Matthew 22:36 ESV)

And Jesus answered him saying:

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. 38 This is the great and first commandment. 39 And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. 40 On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.” (Matthew 22:37–40 ESV)

Are you hearing that?

Jesus said that the SECOND GREATEST COMMANDMENT is to love your neighbour as yourself – well then, the disciples are thinking, wasn’t the gesture of Mary a gross violation of this principle? Shouldn’t this perfume have been sold and the money given over to the poor?

Yes, you'd have to say – and YES I fear I would have said, forgetting that the FIRST COMMANDMENT is:

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.” (Matthew 22:37 ESV)

Love of GOD is an even higher obligation than love of neighbour.

So what is Jesus saying by accepting and endorsing Mary's extravagant gesture?

He is saying: “I am God”.

That's the obvious implication and Mary is the only one in this story who seems to understand.

Now to be clear – he is not saying that we should STOP ministering to the poor. He says – the poor you will always have with you. Ministry to the poor will always be A TOP priority in the church. But it will not THE TOP priority in the church. Our top priority will always be adoring, exploring and proclaiming the BEAUTY MAJESTY AND GLORY OF GOD ALMIGHTY IN THE FACE OF JESUS CHRIST.

Mary got there first and we are encouraged to follow her example.

Fourthly and again – coming right out of the text, this story is asking us to consider whether or not we esteem Jesus higher than wealth in general and our money in particular.

#### **4. More than your money?**

Once again, Mary has it right here.

As we've already mentioned this money was in all probability something that had been given her – likely by her father – as a safety net in the event she didn't marry. In that culture the main family assets in terms of lands and houses were usually passed on to the oldest son but a good father would also generally give certain gifts to his other children if he could afford to do so.

So this was probably Mary's retirement fund.

In modern terms we would say that Mary has cashed in her entire RRSP portfolio in order to express her love and devotion toward Jesus Christ in advance of his coming death upon the cross.

That's extraordinary!

Now the point of the text is NOT that we should all go out and do that. This was a unique and unrepeatable opportunity. Jesus says as much in Mary's defence, he says:

"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." (Matthew 26:10-12 ESV)

William Hendriksen is again helpful here, he says:

"There would be many more opportunities to attend to the cause of Christian charity or benevolence. On the contrary, the opportunity to show love and honor to Jesus in the state of humiliation had almost vanished. Gethsemane, Gabbatha, and Golgotha were just around the corner."<sup>4</sup>

So the text is not telling us to do what Mary did – we can't – it is telling us to think like Mary thought. The text is telling us to ESTEEM JESUS as worth more than all the money in the world. The text is telling us to TRUST JESUS to take care of us – to not put our TRUST in money, but rather to put our trust in Christ.

Mary's faith is the ultimate illustration of Proverbs 11:4

Riches do not profit in the day of wrath, but righteousness delivers from death. (Proverbs 11:4 ESV)

Being rightly related to God through Christ is the only thing that will keep us safe on the day of wrath. Riches will not profit. Silver and gold will be thrown out into the street. But those who have put their hope in JESUS will be saved.

Thanks be to God!

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<sup>4</sup> William Hendriksen, *The Gospel Of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1973), 900.

Finally, this story is in your Bible; and is positioned where it is in order to cause you to consider whether or not you esteem Jesus to be precious enough to pay for the full cost and burden of your sin.

## 5. More than your sin?

Judas valued the life of Jesus at 30 pieces of silver – which according to Exodus 21:32 is the ransom price of a slave. But the Apostle Paul thought that the life of Jesus was worth FAR MORE THAN THAT. Listen to what he said in 1 Timothy 2:5-6. He said:

For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as **a ransom for all**, which is the testimony given at the proper time. (1 Timothy 2:5–6 ESV)

So 30 pieces of silver was the ransom price of **a slave** – but Paul says that the life of Jesus was actually sufficient to RANSOM US ALL.

That's quite a difference!

And where you land on that sliding scale, according to the Bible, will determine your eternal destiny.

So who is he?

How much is he worth?

The Bible says that the MATH of the CROSS makes SENSE because the life of Jesus was INFINITELY PRECIOUS. It would have to be INFINITELY PRECIOUS to pay for the sins of US ALL.

Have you ever thought of that?

How could the death of one Jewish man pay for all the sins of the world?

That doesn't make any sense!

Unless – Jesus WASN'T MERELY a Jewish man. What if he were – as Mary seems to have figured out – WHAT IF HE WERE GOD IN THE FLESH, come to do for us what we could never do for ourselves and come to PAY FOR what we have done in his body on the cross?

Because if THAT'S TRUE – IF THAT'S WHO JESUS IS – then that EVENT REALLY DID CHANGE THE WORLD.

His death really did pay for your sins.

His death really CAN reconcile you to God.

If he was who Mary thought he was.

And so that's what you have to figure out.

And that's why Mary's story is supposed to be remembered wherever and whenever the Gospel is being told. Because Mary's story asks the most important question in the world:

How much is Jesus worth to you?

If he is THE PEARL OF GREAT PRICE – IF HE IS THE MOST PRECIOUS THING IN THE WORLD - then sell everything you have AND TAKE HOLD OF HIM.

Nothing in my hands I bring – simply to thy cross I cling.

That's how this story is supposed to prepare you for Good Friday.

Thanks be to God.

Let's pray together.