

No One Takes My Life From Me

PART 8 - PREPARATION

TEXT: MATTHEW 26:6-16 (ESV)

Wednesday

In this series, we're focusing on the five days Jesus spent in Jerusalem prior to His arrest—from His triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday through His last supper in the upper room. So far we've covered Sunday through Tuesday, which has been for Jesus and His disciples a series of trips back and forth between Bethany and the capital city. Before looking at Wednesday, let's review the cumulative effect of these three days we've already discussed. Before this week began, Jesus told His disciples no one would take His life from Him, but He'd lay it down of His own accord. (Jn 10:18)



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November 9, 2008

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That statement carries incredibly weighty implications, both in what Jesus is saying and in what He's not. He **is** saying no power on earth can perpetrate a single trace of injustice against Him without His allowing it. He is **not** saying, however, He is safe as a result. No one will take His life from Him, but He **will** lay it down. And we've been seeing this over the course of three days now—Jesus laying down His life on His own terms.

On Palm Sunday, Jesus entered Jerusalem to the fanfare of the masses who'd gathered to receive Him as King if He'd have them. John tells us they gathered because they heard what He had done with Lazarus, raising him from the dead. (Jn 12:17-18) It was this reaction that set the religious leaders on edge, making plans to get Jesus out of the picture lest there be civil unrest and Rome bring its retributive hand of justice down hard upon those entertaining these rumors of a Jewish King. The religious leaders were keeping a sharp eye out for Jesus' return to the area. But when He did come back, it was hardly a secret. He went to Lazarus' home, where He'd stay for the entire week.

So the Triumphal Entry was not only less than subtle, it was inciting. To ride from Lazarus' village (*the "scene of the crime" that instigated all this talk of Jesus being a King*) into Jerusalem seated on a colt to the adulation of the crowds (*which imitated the coronation King David orchestrated for his son Solomon*) (1 Kings 1) let everyone know Jesus was not afraid of upsetting people. If the Triumphal Entry was inciting, His activities in Jerusalem's temple over the next two days were even more. With each passing day, He cut deeper into the heart of the religious system there. Monday, He went to the temple and overturned the money changer's tables, after which He remained to teach and heal the blind and lame, refusing to go until He was ready.

The next day, as if Sunday's entry and Monday's upset weren't enough, He returned to the temple again. He was met by the Temple authorities who demanded to know who gave Him permission to act as He did. He posed a question of His own (*about John the Baptist*) designed to show whether they could tell the difference between something that was of God versus something contrived by man. When they refused to answer due to a fear of the public response, He refused to answer them on the principle that they were not interested in the truth. Again, He stayed right there in the temple, teaching the people.

The tension between Jesus and the religious leaders would soon reach a breaking point. By the end of the day Tuesday, Jesus was getting His disciples ready for the end—for the persecution coming their way just after the people of this city rose up to demand His death. As we shift our focus now to an event which seems to have occurred on Wednesday, we don't find Jesus in the temple, but in Bethany at the home of a man named Simon the Leper. And we see a different side of Jesus here. Let's look.

Matthew 26:6-16

⁶Now when Jesus was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, ⁷a 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. ⁸And when the disciples saw it, they were indignant, saying, "Why this waste? ⁹For this could have been sold for a large sum and given to the poor."

¹⁰But Jesus, aware of this, said to them, "Why do you trouble the woman? For she has done a beautiful thing to me. ¹¹For you always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me. ¹²In pouring this ointment on my body, she has done it to prepare me for burial. ¹³Truly, 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."

¹⁴Then one of the twelve, whose name was Judas Iscariot, went to the chief priests ¹⁵and said, "What will you give me if I deliver him over to you?" And they paid him thirty pieces of silver. ¹⁶And from that moment he sought an opportunity to betray him.

A Rare Moment of Stillness

The past several days have been a rush of tension and anger for Jesus' opponents and unflinching resolve for Jesus. He's been constantly on the move, juggling his time between Bethany, Jerusalem and the Mt. of Olives. Words have been His currency, and He has been spending piles of them opposing the self-righteous and preparing His disciples for what He has been telling them about for a while now: *"that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised."* (Mt 16:21)

But here in our text, Jesus is still. He is in the home of Simon the Leper, a man known by what either was or had been wrong with him. It is possible Jesus might even have healed Simon of his leprosy. It seems they were having a meal together, settled in for a time of conversation. I imagine it was warm but sober, since Jesus' disciples were finally starting to understand that Jesus was about to be arrested and probably executed.

This Woman's Reputation

As they're there, a woman with an alabaster flask approaches Jesus. Though Matthew doesn't tell us her name, we not only know who she is, we know a little something about that flask too. John tells us this was Mary of Bethany, Lazarus' sister, (Jn 12:3) and suggests she had been saving this perfume, which was worth a full year's wages, for this very occasion. (Jn 12:7)

She began to pour the perfume on Jesus' head and feet, which Mark tells us she did by breaking open its container. (Mk 14:3) With this action, there was no turning back. Breaking open that alabaster flask was like popping the cork on a \$50,000 bottle of champagne. She was not acting on a whim. She was there to deliberately offer Jesus everything she had. What drove her? By giving to Jesus her most valuable possession, she was expressing that she knew what He was about to give was for her. What she gave to Him was a response to what He was giving to her.

The disciples reacted like many men often do. They considered the monetary value of her perfume and regarded her actions as though she might as well have been burning a year's wages in a bread oven. But they dressed their indignation up in the noble auspices of concern for the poor: "*Think of the poor people who could have benefited from the sale of this perfume.*" (cf. Mt 26:8-9)

But Jesus comes to her aid. What she is doing, He tells them, is beautiful. Let's appreciate the doctrinal principle here. Though the perfume **could** have been sold for a year's wages, what is perfume for? Is it merely a commodity Mary should hold on to in the event that she needs to cash it in? Is this how God would expect her to regard this valuable resource? Apparently not. Perfume is meant to be spilled out and evaporated until it is gone in order that it might fill a room with its beautiful and startling aroma. As the scent electrifies the senses of everyone there, Jesus says her use of this perfume is a beautiful thing.

Some of us are so utilitarian with everything in our lives that we only want to know what a thing can be bought, sold or used for. We have no place for beautiful things unless they serve another purpose as well. We don't watch sun sets, listen to music, read great books, drink fine wine or go to art museums because we can't measure what it gets us in the end. I'm not telling you to drink wine or spend the afternoon at the art museum. Rather, I'm raising a question about your doctrine of God. Do you believe in a God who is strictly utilitarian, measuring everything between you in terms of what it costs you or gains Him?

Everything in creation testifies to a Creator who delights in beauty for beauty's sake. So many things that are beautiful didn't need to be. God opted to make them that way. He opted to make autumn a season saturated with bold, changing color. He didn't have to make the setting sun the spectacle that it is. But He did. Why? Well, one reason must be because beauty pleases Him. Another must be in order to arrest us by our senses when we're otherwise just plodding along with our heads down, learning to live within the economy of pragmatism.

What Mary did was beautiful and Jesus wanted His disciples to know it. She was preparing Him for burial. Jesus sees a great kindness and honor in her gesture. He returns the honor by saying history will never forget her act of beauty. And do you know what? This act of gratitude has been recorded in over 150 languages around the world for over 200 centuries. J.C. Ryle said, "*The speeches of parliamentary orators, the exploits of warriors, the works of poets and painters, will not be mentioned on that day [of God's coming Kingdom]; but the least work that the weakest Christian has done for Christ, or His members, will be found written in a book of everlasting remembrance.*"

Jesus is seeing and placing everything now in the context of His pending death. His consolation to His disciples on Tuesday was to help them when He was gone. And now here in this intimate setting with His dear friends—with all their various quirks and flaws—the scent of redemption fills the room. The scent of this perfume will still stay with Him through His arrest, scourging, crucifixion and burial in Joseph of Arimathea's tomb.

Postscript: Miserable Judas

At the end of this text, Matthew takes up one more important item—Judas' exasperated act of betrayal. For three years Judas kept (and stole from) the purse of Jesus and the disciples. (Jn 12:6) He was wired to determine what a thing was worth and function within that economy. Perhaps when he realized Jesus wasn't the war-like king he was hoping for, he realized his association with Jesus wouldn't bring notoriety but suffering. Maybe something clicked as he watched Mary anoint Jesus with this perfume of such a high street value and was now gone. Maybe as that perfume dripped from Jesus' beard to the floor, Judas saw his life in those drops in the very act of being wasted.

After this dinner, Judas makes his way across the Kidron Valley, this time on his own, to have a very different meeting with the chief priests than ones Jesus had been having. "*How much will you give me if I hand Him over?*" What makes this so chilling is they had a ready answer: thirty pieces of silver—about four month's wages. Judas took it. This was what Jesus' life and Judas' betrayal added up to—about a third of what Mary's perfume was worth, just enough to make it through the winter.

You get the sense that Judas was very difficult to write about. Matthew's words are terse, like a legal brief in which you'd expect Judas to be coldly referred to as Mr. Iscariot, if people talked that way then. Some want to paint Judas in a sympathetic light, arguing that if it weren't for him Jesus wouldn't have gone to the cross, as if salvation was somehow helped along by Judas.

Scripture challenges us here. Why would we want to sympathize with Judas unless it is because we recognize we are capable of doing the same thing? You'll find no shred of sympathy for this man. In fact, you find just the opposite. John says Judas was "*doomed to destruction.*" (Jn 17:12) Jesus Himself says of Judas, "*Woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed. It would have been better for that man if he had not been born.*" (Mt 26:24)

What Judas did was miserable from beginning to end—from the cloak-and-dagger slinking into the council of those who named this price to his later remorse when he gave the money back as though it was a toxin liquefying his soul (Mt 27:3-4) to his horrible, gruesome, self-inflicted death later that week. (Mt 27:5, Ac. 1:18-19)

The words on Judas are few, but powerful. They present a man destined to do the unthinkable for a negligible reward, which he does without a second thought. They present a man who spent years in the company of Christ and His disciples, yet never loved Jesus. They present a picture of a man so close to Christ and yet still lost. The words are sobering because they could be a picture of any of us and no one else would really know.

Is your back turned on Jesus? Are there thirty pieces of silver jingling deep in your soul today? Have you settled on a price you are willing to accept in exchange for a life rid of Jesus? Are you seeking opportunity to betray Him? You may be thinking, "*How dare you! I'm not like Judas!*" Let this text remind you today that your relationship with Jesus is not a game. But for the grace of God, we're all vastly more like Judas than we are like Jesus.

There are two responses to Jesus in this text—one giving everything she had to be close to Him, the other seeking a profit, hoping to be rid of Him. There's Judas who looks over Jesus, cutting his losses to his ultimate destruction. But there's also Mary, who sees Jesus, who plumbs the depth of His reason for being there—and in Him she finds life. She loves what she sees because she knows He has come to honor her by giving Himself for her salvation. When you look, what do you see?