

“EXTRAVAGANT LOVE” **(Matthew 26:1-16)**

Sometimes the love and affection people have for someone makes them do some crazy things. One guy, a while back, was so in love with a girl that he bought tickets to her favorite play – The Phantom of the Opera – at the Majestic Theatre in New York. But just going to the play was not enough to express his love, he bought tickets for every seat in the theatre which held 1,609 seats. He must have really loved this girl. I hope it worked out for him.

Sometimes people do crazy things out of love and affection for their pets. Some of you may remember Leona Helmsley, the wealthy hotel owner, who left \$12 million in her will to her dog. I can only imagine what that dog did with all the money.

Others are crazy about their sports teams - you see them in the stands – at least in the good old days before Covid – dressed up with crazy hats and wigs, and their faces painted with their team’s colors. They may be fairly introverted the rest of the week, but on game day they have no inhibitions or filter. Jesus said, “Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.” You can tell what a person loves the most by simply observing what they’re passionate about, what they spend their money on, and what they devote their time to. Our passage today in Matthew 26 challenges us to evaluate our love for Jesus. Is He my greatest treasure? And if so, what am I willing to do to express my love for Him?

In verses 1-16 we see three intensely passionate responses to Jesus – two of them are angry and hostile – but sandwiched in between these hateful responses is one of the most extravagant displays of love for Jesus in the Bible. Let’s begin in verse one as we observe the first response to Jesus... “When Jesus had finished saying all these things, he said to his disciples, “As you know, the Passover is two days away—and the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified” (1-2).

For several chapters Jesus has been preparing His disciples for His departure, and now it’s time for Him to fulfill His mission for coming to earth and die for the sins of mankind. That’s why He’s in Jerusalem, and He’s only two days away from His death on Passover. Jesus’ arrival in Jerusalem, just a few days earlier, causes a stir. The common people love Jesus, but the religious leaders despise Him. Jesus had always been a polarizing figure – He was a fork in the road – He was someone you could not remain neutral about. And the same is true today.

In verses 3-5 we read, “Then the chief priests and the elders of the people assembled in the palace of the high priest, whose name was Caiaphas, and they schemed to arrest Jesus secretly and kill him. ‘But not during the festival,’ they said, ‘or there may be a riot among the people.’” You would think that Israel’s spiritual leaders would fully embrace Jesus as their long-awaited Messiah – He was everything the Old Testament prophets predicted He would be, and He backed up His claims to be God come in the flesh by His supernatural miracles and authoritative teachings. But they hated Jesus with a demonic-like anger.

They hated Him because He called them out on their hypocrisy and told them to repent. “How dare you tell we esteemed priests and elders to repent? Sinners need to repent, and we’re not sinners.” They also hated Him because He threatened their power and control over the people. They had a nice religious system set up, and they didn’t want to lose money, prestige, and authority.

They had been plotting to kill Jesus for some time, but they must do so in a way that will not get them into trouble with the Roman authorities. It's Passover week – a time of year when Jerusalem swelled to five times its normal population with thousands of pilgrims coming from all over the region. They know that the common people see Jesus as a miracle-worker and wise teacher, and that arresting Jesus could set off a powder-keg of unrest. So they wait for the right time and opportunity, and that opportunity will come later in this passage.

In verse 6 the scene shifts from extreme hate for Jesus to extreme love... “While Jesus was in Bethany in the home of Simon the Leper, a woman came to him with an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume, which she poured on his head as he was reclining at the table” (6-7). Whenever Jesus came to Jerusalem, He stayed in Bethany, a little village about two miles east of Jerusalem. During His final week He journeyed back and forth between Bethany and Jerusalem. While in Bethany, Jesus stayed with His good friends – Mary, Martha, and Lazarus.

On this occasion Matthew writes that Jesus is in the house of Simon the leper. We don't know anything about Simon, except that he had once been a leper, and we can surmise that Jesus had healed him. He had become one of Jesus' close disciples, and out of gratitude, He has Jesus and His disciples over dinner. We also know from the John's gospel that Mary, Martha, and Lazarus are also there.

When people ate in Jesus' day, they didn't sit in chairs like we do, but they reclined, leaning on their left side and eating with their right hand. While they're reclining, a woman at the dinner party leaves the room and comes back with an alabaster vase of very expensive perfume. Mark says that the perfume was “pure nard.” Nard was fragrant oil made from the root of a rare plant in India. It was high-quality stuff. Not only was the perfume ultra-expensive, but so was the alabaster vase it was kept in – a hard stone imported from Egypt, and was proven to be the best way to preserve perfume.

Matthew does not name the woman, but we know from John's account that it's Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus. To everyone's surprise, she breaks the vase and pours all the perfume on Jesus' head. John adds that she also pours it on His feet, so that His entire body is anointed. Not only that, but John says that she loosens her hair – something women in that day did not do in public – and wipes Jesus' feet with it – something only a slave would do. She doesn't care what others think.

Now, imagine you're sitting here at this dinner party and you're watching this. What are you thinking? This lady is nuts! She's embarrassing herself. She's not thinking straight. She's snapped. We don't have to guess what the response was of the other dinner guests. Verses 8-9, “When the disciples saw this, 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.’”

After the disciples get over their shock, they get angry. “What a waste, Mary. What are you thinking? Do you know how expensive that stuff is? You could have sold the perfume and given the money to the poor. What a stupid thing you just did.” We know from John's account that Judas is the spokesman for the rest of the disciples. He's the group's treasurer and he's good at numbers. He knows how expensive the perfume is. Mark tells us that it was worth 300 denarii. A denarius was the daily wage of a common laborer, and so 300 denarii would be a year's wages. Think of what you'd make in a year, and imagine taking all of it and pouring it out on Jesus.

The disciples can't understand Mary's act of worship because their hearts are consumed with other priorities. While Mary's heart is focused on Jesus, theirs is focused on earthly things such as gaining status and power, and arguing over who would be greatest in the kingdom. Judas' heart is consumed with greed. His pious comments about giving the money to the poor is a smokescreen to cover up what he would have done with the money.

John 12:6 says, "He did not say this because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief; as keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it." Judas could care less about the poor, he just wants more money to embezzle.

To everyone's amazement, Jesus defends Mary, and in verses 10-13 we learn five important things about her act of worship. Number one, **love of Jesus precedes service for Jesus**. Verses 10-11, "Aware of this, Jesus said to them, 'Why are you bothering this woman? She has done a beautiful thing to me. The poor you will always have with you, but you will not always have me.'" While the disciples berate Mary, Jesus commends her... "What you've done is a beautiful thing."

Every time Mary is mentioned in the gospel stories, she's at the feet of Jesus. In Hebrew culture sitting at someone's feet was the mark of a disciple and a learner. She wanted to soak up everything Jesus said. On another occasion we read that she was sitting at Jesus' feet while her sister Martha was busy working in the kitchen and getting dinner ready. Martha didn't like it. She doesn't even confront Mary, she goes right to Jesus. "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!" Jesus says, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about many things, but Mary has chosen what is better."

Jesus isn't saying that service for Him is wrong – we are called to serve Him and work hard for Him. What He is saying is that service for Jesus always follows love of Jesus. Whatever you do for God or others is not going to last long without being motivated by love. If it's done merely out of duty, you get tired and grumpy and frustrated. You get burned-out and angry. If you don't sit at the feet of Jesus and spend time with Him and listen to Him and be refreshed by Him, then anything you have to give Him will be empty – it won't last the test of time. Mary understood the importance of loving Jesus, and out of the abundance of her love for Jesus, she gave. She gave her all. True service follows true love.

The second thing we learn from Mary's act is that **loving Jesus is our top priority**. Jesus says, "The poor you will always have with you, but you will not always have me." He's not saying that caring for the poor is unimportant, but the priority is loving Jesus. Jesus reminds them that they will only have Him a short while longer – two days, in fact, before He goes to the cross. Our natural tendency is to prioritize doing things for Jesus, but more important is being with Jesus. The most important thing is to abide in Jesus – to spend time with Him – to talk with Him and sit at His feet and listen.

What many Christians don't realize – and I have been guilty of this many times myself – is that you can do many things, great things, for Jesus, but have a heart that is far from Him. Few people did more for Jesus than Bob Pierce, who founded the relief agency World Vision. Yet while people outwardly saw a man driven to serve the needs of people and working endless hours on behalf of the less fortunate, inwardly he was a mess. While He raised millions for the poor, he was an angry man who treated people poorly and was eventually fired by the board of the ministry he started. He neglected his family – often being gone ten months out of the year. He divorced his wife and alienated all his children. One of his daughters committed suicide. He died a bitter man. We can easily get caught up in doing things for Jesus that we forget the priority of being with Jesus.

In his famous chapter on love, the Apostle Paul stresses this very point... “If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing” (1 Corinthians 13:3). Our love and worship of the Lord is to be our priority – it’s to be the type of love where everything else flows out from it – which includes taking care of the poor. It must all flow from a love for Jesus.

The third truth we learn from Mary’s act is that **true love for Jesus is extravagant**. When you deeply love someone, you’re willing to pay any price and give up any thing for the object of your love – you’ll buy every seat in the house. Mary poured out a year’s worth of income on Jesus. I think of a missionary named William Borden who, in the early 1900s, was already a millionaire as an heir to the Borden Dairy Estate. For his high school graduation present, his parents gave him a trip around the world. As he traveled through Asia, the Middle East, and Europe, he felt a growing burden for the world’s hurting people. When he returned home, he told his family and friends that he wanted to become a missionary. Many of his friends and family thought he was throwing his life away.

Borden began pouring hours and hours of his free time in college by visiting orphanages and rescue missions, reaching out to the poor and downcast. His example influenced many of his classmates to do the same. He gave away thousands of dollars to missions. After he graduated with highest honors from Yale and Princeton Seminary, rejected several high paying jobs to become a missionary to Muslims. He moved to Egypt to study Arabic, but four months after arriving in Egypt, Borden contracted spinal meningitis. Within a month William Borden was dead at age 25. Borden was buried in a common, non-descript cemetery for missionaries. On his gravestone it says, “Apart from faith in Christ, there is no explanation for such a life.”

When you sacrificially pour out your life for Jesus, some people – even those closest to you – are not going to understand. Your life and your choices won’t make sense to them. Why are you wasting your life? Why, with all the things you could be doing, are you spending so much time at church? Why would you give 10% of your income away? Why would you give up a beautiful Sunday morning of recreation to go sit through a church service and sing songs to someone you can’t see? Why do you live such a goody-two-shoes life? Go out and have a little fun. Why do you continue to believe in God when so many bad things have happened to you? In Mary’s case, in William Borden’s case, it was love for Jesus. When the reality of all that Jesus sacrificed for you sinks in, no sacrifice for Him is too great.

In Luke 7 we’re told of another time when Jesus was anointed, but this time it was not only with perfume, but with tears. In the passage, Jesus is invited to the home of a Pharisee named Simon – another Simon – and while He’s reclining at the table a woman comes up to Jesus – just like Mary did – but this woman is a notorious sinner. She has a past. As she stands behind Jesus she begins to weep, and she weeps and weeps, with her tears saturating the feet of Jesus. And then she too pours out perfume on Jesus.

Simon the Pharisee is looking at this and he’s embarrassed. He thinks, “If Jesus truly was a prophet, He would know who is touching Him and rebuke her.” Jesus says, “I have something I want to tell you.” Simon says, “I’m listening.” Jesus says, “There’s these two people who had debt – one 100 denarii, the other 50 – and neither could pay the debt. But the money lender graciously forgave both. Simon, who will love that money lender more?” Simon says, “Probably the one who was forgiven the greater debt.”

And Jesus said, “You spoke correctly. When I came into your home, you gave me no water for my feet, and yet this woman has washed my feet with her tears, and dried them with her hair. You gave me no kiss on my cheek, but this woman has not stopped kissing my feet. You didn’t pour any oil on my head, but she’s anointed my feet with costly perfume. It’s true, Simon, that’s she’s sinned much, but she loves much.

Then Jesus says this, “Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven—as her great love has shown. But whoever has been forgiven little loves little” (Luke 7:47). Have you been forgiven much? Then the natural response – the only response – is to love much. We love Him because He first loved us. Jesus poured out His life for us – the least we can do is pour out our love on Him.

The fourth truth we glean from Mary’s example is that **love for Jesus keeps us in tune with Jesus**. Mary was profoundly perceptive – in a way the other disciples weren’t. In verse 12 Jesus says, “When she poured this perfume on my body, she did it to prepare me for burial.” Jesus told His disciples on a number of occasions, as He did in verse one of this passage, that He would soon be delivered up to be crucified. But His words went in one ear and out the other. They didn’t get it. They were not words they wanted to hear – they didn’t match what they wanted for Jesus and for themselves.

Mary is the only one who connected the dots. She is the only one who took His predictions seriously. That’s because she had learned to sit at the feet of Jesus and listen to every word He said. And based on what Jesus said, she acts. In Jesus’ day, before bodies were placed in tombs it was customary to clean or anoint them – and you’d do so with perfumes or ointments or spices. That’s what Mary does. She’s responds in faith to Jesus’ prediction of His death, and she anoints her Messiah in preparation for His death to come.

Unlike the other disciples, Mary did not have any preconceived notions of what Jesus came to do. She simply sat at His feet and listened. She tuned into what He said. When Jesus says, “I’m going to the cross to die,” she didn’t argue – she didn’t debate with Jesus – she believed Him and she got out her bottle of perfume and prepared His body for burial.

In Galatians 5:25 Paul says, “Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.” This was Mary. Keeping in step with the Spirit means that you’re not running ahead of the Spirit in your own power and you’re not lagging behind in fear. You are in beat, you are synchronized, your steps match the Holy Spirits. You get rid of any preconceived notions of what the Lord should or shouldn’t do, and you simply listen – you sit at His feet in a posture of humility and yieldedness – and do whatever He says.

The fifth truth we learn from this amazing display of love is that **loving Jesus leaves a lasting fragrance** ... Verse 13, “Truly I tell you, wherever this gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her.” Jesus says that the story of Mary’s extravagant act of love will be told and retold down through history – it will be remembered as a powerful illustration of God’s extravagant love for us. Each time we read of about Mary pouring out the costly perfume on Jesus, we think of the costly sacrifice of Jesus, pouring out His very life on our behalf. As the hymn says, “Jesus paid it all, all to Him I owe; sin had left a crimson stain, He washed it white as snow.”

John's account tells us that when Mary broke open her bottle of perfume, the fragrance filled up the entire room. You couldn't miss it. It's a picture of what happens when believers pour out their lives in service to God. Paul says in 2 Corinthians 2:15, "For we are to God the pleasing aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing." God has left us here on earth to be a fragrance in the world – so that when people are around us, they can see and smell the love of the Lord. Like Mary, we can break open jars of perfume in our home, at our work, and at our school that will leave a fragrance on others. Your fragrance will repel those who will never listen to the good news, but it will attract those who will be saved through your witness. Just keep smelling good and leave the results up to God.

In verses 14-16 we go from the fragrant aroma of Mary's worship to the rotten smell of Judas' betrayal... "Then one of the Twelve—the one called Judas Iscariot—went to the chief priests and asked, 'What are you willing to give me if I deliver him over to you? So they counted out for him thirty pieces of silver. From then on Judas watched for an opportunity to hand him over.'"

Many parents have named their little girl Mary, but one has named their little boy Judas. The difference between Mary and Judas could not be more stark...

- Mary loved Jesus – Judas never had a real relationship with Jesus.
- Mary sat at Jesus' feet and soaked in all He had to say – Judas spent three years with Jesus, but never truly listened to Jesus – Jesus' words never penetrated His heart.
- To Mary, Jesus was worth all of her life's savings. To Judas, Jesus was worth only thirty pieces of silver – not a lot of money.
- Mary valued Jesus, but Judas valued money.
- Mary will always be remembered for her extravagant love – Judas will be remembered for his betrayal.

We're never really told Judas' motives for betraying Jesus, but it appears like it ran deeper than money. I believe that Judas followed Jesus for the same reason many people are initially attracted to Jesus – to get something out of Jesus. Judas, like all of Israel, expected Jesus to start a political rebellion and overthrow Rome. As the group treasurer he assumed that he would be given an important position in Jesus' new government. Judas was absorbed with Jesus. Although he spent countless hours with Jesus, He never loved Jesus. He never had a personal relationship with Him. When he sees Jesus praising Mary for wasting perfume on Him and saying that it was to prepare Him for burial, he finally realizes that Jesus' is not the Messiah he expected, and that there was nothing in it for Him. He slips out the back door, and in the cover of darkness meets with Israel's leaders and cuts a deal... "I'll tell you where Jesus is for 30 pieces of silver" (ten times less than the amount Mary poured on Jesus).

Where you treasure is, there will your heart be also. What do you treasure? What are you most passionate about? What consumes your attention, your affection, your time, your money? As you sit at the feet of Jesus, and you fall deeper in love with Him, all other affections in this world will fade, and you will gladly pour out all you have in response to the one who gave everything for you.