

Called to Remember

Bible Background • MATTHEW 26:1–13

Printed Text • MATTHEW 26:1–13 | Devotional Reading • ACTS 2:29–39

Aim for Change

By the end of this lesson we will: CONTRAST the deeds of the woman with the reactions of the disciples; APPRECIATE the woman's display of love for Jesus; and REMEMBER our call to share the Good News of Jesus Christ despite resistance or ridicule.

In Focus

One day, Rose received a check for \$100,000—the largest amount of money she had received in her life. According to the letter, a distant relative remembered her in a will and wanted Rose to use the funds as she wished. Rose prayed about it for a few weeks and decided to donate the money to her church's struggling capital campaign. John objected vehemently, and they argued about it several times. But her mind was made up.

Her pastor, Rev. Jamison, was so overjoyed that he called her to express his gratitude. “Mother Rose, I assure you, we will remember your sacrifice!”

Rose wasn't concerned with being remembered, but rather with doing what God had told her to do. She passed away later that year. Three years later, her church opened Rose's House, a temporary shelter for homeless young women with children on the same block as the church. Rev. Jamison invited John to the opening ceremony to tour the home and meet the women whom the church was helping. John stood on the porch and wept quietly, “I get it now, Rose. I really do.”

God honors sacrifices made from a pure heart. How can remembering believers' good deeds bring others closer to Christ? Why does God call us to remember His good deeds?

Keep in Mind

“Verily I say unto you, Wheresoever this gospel shall be preached in the whole world, there shall also this, that this woman hath done, be told for a memorial of her” (Matthew 26:13, KJV).

Words You Should Know

A. Precious *barutimos* (Gk.) — Having heaviness, great value.

B. Waste *apoleia* (Gk.) — Utter destruction or ruin.

Say It Correctly

Caiaphas. KAHY-uh-fuhs.

KJV

Matthew 26:1 And it came to pass, when Jesus had finished all these sayings, he said unto his disciples,
2 Ye know that after two days is the feast of the passover, and the Son of man is betrayed to be crucified.
3 Then assembled together the chief priests, and the scribes, and the elders of the people, unto the palace of the high priest, who was called Caiaphas,
4 And consulted that they might take Jesus by subtilty, and kill him.
5 But they said, Not on the feast day, lest there be an uproar among the people.
6 Now when Jesus was in Bethany, in the house of Simon the leper,
7 There came unto him a woman having an alabaster box of very precious ointment, and poured it on his head, as he sat at meat.
8 But when his disciples saw it, they had indignation, saying, To what purpose is this waste?
9 For this ointment might have been sold for much, and given to the poor.
10 When Jesus understood it, he said unto them, Why trouble ye the woman? for she hath wrought a good work upon me.
11 For ye have the poor always with you; but me ye have not always.
12 For in that she hath poured this ointment on my body, she did it for my burial.
13 Verily I say unto you, Wheresoever this gospel shall be preached in the whole world, there shall also this, that this woman hath done, be told for a memorial of her.

NIV

Matthew 26:1 When Jesus had finished saying all these things, he said to his disciples,
2 “As you know, Passover begins in two days, and the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified.”
3 At that same time the leading priests and elders were meeting at the residence of Caiaphas, the high priest, 4 plotting how to capture Jesus secretly and kill him.
5 “But not during the Passover celebration,” they agreed, “or the people may riot.”
6 Meanwhile, Jesus was in Bethany at the home of Simon, a man who had previously had leprosy.
7 While he was eating, a woman came in with a beautiful alabaster jar of expensive perfume and poured it over his head.
8 The disciples were indignant when they saw this. “What a waste!” they said.
9 “It could have been sold for a high price and the money given to the poor.”
10 But Jesus, aware of this, replied, “Why criticize this woman for doing such a good thing to me?
11 You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me.
12 She has poured this perfume on me to prepare my body for burial.
13 I tell you the truth, wherever the Good News is preached throughout the world, this woman’s deed will be remembered and discussed.”

The People, Places, and Times

Bethany. It is the name of one of two cities often mentioned together in the Old Testament: Bethphage and Bethany. You would find Bethany about two miles along your way from Jerusalem to Jericho, on the southwestern side of the Mount of Olives (Mark 11:1). In Bethany, some of the most important events of Jesus’ life occurred. Martha, Mary, and Lazarus lived there, so this was where Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead (John 11). During Jesus’ final week before He was crucified, He spent at least one night in Bethany (Matthew 21:17). Also, from a site near Bethany, Jesus ascended into heaven (Luke 24:50). The village of Bethany is also near the Jordan River where John the Baptist baptized people (John 1:28).

Caiaphas. He was the high priest before whom Jesus stood trial (Matthew 26:3, 57; John 18:13, 24). A member of the Sadducees and the Sanhedrin council, Caiaphas was the son-in-law and eventual successor of the high

priest, Annas. He held the position from AD 18 until he was deposed by Vitellius, Pontius Pilate's successor, in AD 36–37. John records in his Gospel that Caiaphas judged it was expedient that Jesus should die for the people (John 11:49–52; 18:14).

Background

Matthew tells the account of the woman anointing Jesus with perfume just days before the Last Supper. Some scholars suggest Matthew and Mark may have chosen to relay this event before the Last Supper to contrast the complete devotion of Mary with the betrayal of Judas, the next event they recount in their Gospels. (John's Gospel also builds tension with Judas in this scene, but in a different way; see John 12:4.) Biblical scholars have concluded that this woman from Bethany who anointed Jesus was Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus (John 12:1–3). This event of Mary anointing Jesus soon before His death is recorded in Matthew, Mark, and John. Luke relates a similar story of Jesus being anointed with perfume by an unnamed sinful woman (Luke 7:36–50), but key details of the accounts differ, leading scholars to conclude that it was a separate event.

At-A-Glance

1. The Plot to Kill Jesus (Matthew 26:1–5)
2. The Expensive Oil Used to Bless Jesus (vv. 6–7)
3. The Disciples Did Not Understand the Blessing (vv. 8–9)
4. Jesus Explains the Blessing (vv. 10–13)

In Depth

1. The Plot to Kill Jesus (Matthew 26:1–5)

Jesus was a masterful teacher. He wanted His disciples and the people to know what would transpire during the end times, despite what the Pharisees taught (see Matthew 24–25). Jesus' teaching was so convicting and radically different from traditional laws that the religious leaders couldn't stand it any longer; they had to do something about it. They were determined to destroy Jesus at all costs, no matter what they had to do. Jesus knew that the time of His betrayal and crucifixion would come after the Feast of the Passover (Matthew 26:2). Therefore, He was determined to prepare His followers for the next phase of ministry. As Jesus spent intimate time with the disciples, His purpose was to give them hope even in the midst of confusing, troubling times.

Matthew says that the chief priests, scribes, and elders conferred together with Caiaphas, the high priest of Jerusalem, for the purpose of destroying Jesus. Matthew is seemingly pointing to the fulfillment of a prophecy attested by King David: "The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the Lord, and against His anointed..." (Psalm 2:2). The high priest supposedly served God and the people. But Caiaphas knew it would be expedient to get rid of Jesus if he was to maintain his position in the Jewish nation. How easy it is for people to manipulate the truth for the sake of expedience!

Like Caiaphas, people are often more concerned about position and prestige than they are about truth. The Pharisees were concerned about the holiday, and they intended to remain in good standing with the Jews, despite their hypocrisy (Matthew 26:5). However, the religious leaders didn't understand that God would use their actions to bring about His much higher plan in the lives of all people. Believers will face opposition; sometimes it may even come from within the body of Christ. We also know that whenever God begins to use a believer to promote His kingdom, Satan will plot to destroy that person. In spite of this, we can be encouraged because we know that God uses our enemies to bring about a much bigger plan in our lives. As the Apostle Paul affirms, everything works together for the good of people who love God and are called according to His purpose (Romans 8:28).

2. The Expensive Oil Used to Bless Jesus (vv. 6–7)

Some scholars suggest that Jesus was a guest of Simon because He had healed him of his leprosy. Although Matthew doesn't say specifically, there were likely many people at Simon's house with Jesus and His disciples, since that was how they ate meals in those days. Among Simon's guests was a woman whom God used to prepare Jesus for His burial, one of the most important events in history. Matthew doesn't give her identity, possibly because to him that is not as important as her actions. While Jesus and His disciples shared one of their last meals together, the woman must have understood the importance of this opportunity to honor Jesus (cf. John 12:1–2). She had in her possession an "alabaster box of very precious ointment" (Matthew 26:7). The word "alabaster" describes a very compact and translucent material made of hard calcium that was often used to make carved vases in which to store perfume. The vases are usually made without handles and can be easily broken to remove their contents.

Suddenly and without notice, the woman approached Jesus in the midst of supper and poured the anointing "perfume" on His head (v. 7). The woman did not ask Jesus for anything. Instead, she recognized the power of the moment and decided to give the Savior her best. How often do we come to Jesus asking Him to bless us instead of giving Him our best like this woman did? While the disciples and Simon's other guests ate their meals, the woman anointed the Lord recognizing Jesus as the Christ ("Anointed One") of Israel. Though Jesus had already shared what would happen to Him, it seems as though the disciples had no clue about what our Savior would endure—but this woman did!

3. The Disciples Did Not Understand the Blessing (vv. 8–9)

Scripture indicates that the disciples were not pleased with her actions. In fact, Matthew uses the word "indignation" (26:8) to describe their attitude, which was marked by anger, scorn, and contempt. The disciples demonstrated insensitivity to Jesus and this woman. When the disciples saw the oil being poured on Jesus, they murmured among themselves, convinced that the oil was wasted (v. 8). How foolish of them to think it was a waste to give the Lord the best! They thought that instead of being poured out on Jesus, the oil should have been sold and profits generated so they could feed and take care of the poor. John records the oil used as "about a pint of pure nard" (John 12:3), which was imported from India and worth about a year's wages. The disciples have a logical point to make, but they do not comprehend God's will.

4. Jesus Explains the Blessing (vv. 10–13)

Amid the disciples' criticism, Jesus quickly comes to the woman's defense because she was willing to share with and minister to Him. Jesus is so impressed that He uses the woman's actions as another teaching moment for the disciples. According to Moses, Israel would always have to minister to the poor and outcast (Deuteronomy 15:11), so the disciples' attitude did not carry weight with Jesus. In fact, Jesus made it clear that it was their duty to take care of the poor, whether or not the oil was sold for that purpose (Matthew 25:41–46). However, Jesus affirms that this woman recognized the moment and took time to honor Him. Jesus was about to give His life as a ransom for many; therefore, it was more important to prepare for His death than it was to sell oil. Because of this woman's sacrifice and service, Jesus declared that wherever the Gospel is preached, her example of sacrificial giving would be told in memory of her. That is, as the story is told of Jesus' death and burial, everyone would know that this woman of Bethany used her alabaster box of perfume to anoint the Lord (26:13).

Are we willing to give the Lord our best in service, worship, and obedience, or are we holding back a portion for our own needs?

Search the Scriptures

1. How did Jesus' disciples respond to the woman's anointing of Jesus (Matthew 26:8–9)?
2. What reason did Jesus give for the woman's anointing Him (v. 12)?
3. When Jesus talks about the Gospel being preached in the whole world, of what is He speaking (v. 13)?

Discuss the Meaning

1. How can we give a sacrificial offering to Jesus?
2. Are you willing to give your best to the Lord in service, worship, and obedience? Why? Why not?

Liberating Lesson

There are so many hurting people in our society—so many who need somebody to demonstrate love to them. There are many who need someone to give extravagantly out of their love for them and their love for Jesus. Jesus was the first to give extravagantly for us; He gave His life to give us life more abundantly. It is important not to misinterpret Jesus' comment about the poor being with us always, as He advises for us to give to the poor as though we are giving to Him (Matthew 25:40). One way we love Jesus extravagantly is by loving one another extravagantly, modeling His kind of love. It requires more focus on the people in front of you and honoring them than on the benefit you will receive from showing love. How can you love someone extravagantly this week? How will you share God's best with those in need?

Application for Activation

Spend time in prayer this week and ask the Lord to give you the grace to discern any objectors in your life, so you can love and forgive them. Also, ask the Lord to help you recognize people He will use to bless and minister to you in your time of need. Don't allow the fear of betrayal to destroy God-ordained friendships. Thank God every day for being in control of your life, and learn to see His hand in every situation you face.

Follow the Spirit

What God wants me to do:

Remember Your Thoughts

Special insights I have learned:

More Light on the Text

Matthew 26:1–13

¹ And it came to pass, when Jesus had finished all these sayings, he said unto his disciples, ² Ye know that after two days is the feast of the passover, and the Son of man is betrayed to be crucified.

Jesus has just finished giving the prophecy of the “Great Assize” or final judgment between the sheep and the goats. The feast of Passover that the Jews kept every year was approaching, and Jesus knew He was to be crucified during that feast. The tone of the narrative in Matthew has shifted from judgment on humanity based on their relationship with the Great King and Shepherd, to the holy Lamb of God taking on judgment on behalf of humanity. The disciples were warned numerous times that Jesus would die, which would have completely shocked them had they understood His message. Yet His disciples continued not to understand what Jesus was saying until He was betrayed and arrested.

³ Then assembled together the chief priests, and the scribes, and the elders of the people, unto the palace of the high priest, who was called Caiaphas, ⁴ And consulted that they might take Jesus by subtilty, and kill him. ⁵ But they said, Not on the feast day, lest there be an uproar among the people.

The assembly of the Sanhedrin, also translated “council,” was made up of seventy members plus the high priest (who served as the president) and functioned as the Jewish supreme tribunal. Its jurisdiction at the time of Christ and during the Roman occupation was wide, covering civil and religious matters of Jewish Law and, to some degree, criminal matters. Capital cases, however, required the confirmation of the Roman procurator (John 18:31), though the procurator’s judgment was usually in accordance with the demands of the Sanhedrin, which in Jewish Law had the power of life and death. The Sanhedrin had administrative authority and could make arrests and carry them out with its own law enforcement officers (cf. Matthew 26:47; Mark 14:43; Acts 4:1). The phrase “assembled together” (Gk. *sunechthesan*, soon-EKH-theh-san, “brought together”) indicates that the council was summoned for an extraordinary session consisting of the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders of the people. Caiaphas was the high priest between AD 18 and 36. In that capacity and according to custom, he would preside over the session that would be summoned in his open courtyard.

The religious leaders had several obstacles to overcome before they could achieve their goal of having Jesus killed. First, Jesus was popular with the people; additionally, Roman law restricted the religious leaders’ capacity to try capital cases. Their desire to eliminate Jesus necessitated that they devise a way to overcome these obstacles. The grammatical structure of the Greek word *sunebouleusanto* (soo-neh-boo-LEW-san-toe, which means “having planned together” and is translated as “consulted” here) conveys the meaning of preexisting, deliberate, and consensual conspiracy to capture Jesus by subtlety (Gk. *dolos*, DOEloce, guile or deception) and have Him killed. Any doubts the religious leaders might have had about Jesus’ popularity among the people were powerfully erased by the events of the preceding days. The people had responded spontaneously to Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem (Matthew 21:8–11), the cleansing of the Temple (vv. 15–16), and the debates with the Pharisees, Herodians, and Sadducees (22:15–46). Hence, the leaders were wary of possible mob action against them. They resolved not to arrest Jesus at the height of the Passover festivities, reasoning that to act otherwise would cause an uproar (Gk. *thorubos*, THOW-roo-boce, tumult or riot) among the people. Obviously, they were not acting in the people’s best interests.

⁶ Now when Jesus was in Bethany, in the house of Simon the leper, ⁷ There came unto him a woman having an alabaster box of very precious ointment, and poured it on his head, as he sat at meat.

While the religious leaders of the day were busy at the high priest’s palace plotting how to kill Jesus, the believers were at Bethany giving Him honor in the home of Simon the leper. New Testament scholars have worked very hard, without much agreement, to identify the particular Simon in whose home this gathering took

place. It is likely that Simon was one of the many lepers Jesus cured during His earthly ministry. But what is important for us to note here is how Jesus—the King of kings—graciously relates to men of lowly position. Among the Jews, lepers were considered religiously and ceremonially unclean, and were therefore quarantined or avoided (Leviticus 13:1–46). As in many human societies even today, the social stigma that “clean” people imposed on lepers oftentimes remained even after the disease had been cured. Jesus did not just cure Simon of leprosy and keep His distance, He also broke all sociocultural and religious barriers to come near to eat with him in his own home.

The woman is not mentioned by name in this passage. But some scholars have identified her as Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus (John 12:3). Whoever she was, this woman brought with her some very expensive perfume encased in an equally expensive container. The term “alabaster box” actually refers to a flask or jar made of special white or yellow limestone named after Alabaster, the town in Egypt where it is chiefly found. Matthew describes the perfume as precious. The Greek word translated as “precious” is *barutimos* (bah-ROO-tee-mo-ee), which means “of heavy value” (from Gk. *barus*, bah-ROOSE, physically weighty or heavy). The woman poured out on Jesus’ head this highly expensive perfume. She may have intentionally poured the ointment on Jesus’ head and also intentionally rubbed some on His feet, a conclusion one could gather from the variance in the Gospel accounts that tell the story. It is even more probable that what the Holy Spirit is communicating through the apostles is similar to the phenomenon recorded in Psalm 133:2 concerning the priestly ordination of Aaron. The anointing oil that was poured on Aaron’s head dripped down through his beard, onto his garments, and down onto his feet. Whatever the case, the important fact is that this woman spared no expense in showing her devotion to her Lord. She bought a very expensive ointment and poured it on Jesus.

⁸ But when his disciples saw it, they had indignation, saying, To what purpose is this waste? ⁹ For this ointment might have been sold for much, and given to the poor.

The disciples were obviously challenged, and possibly provoked to jealousy, by this woman’s act of devotion to the Lord. The phrase “had indignation” (Gk. *aganakteo*, ah-gah-nak-TEH-oh) is from the Greek for displeased, incensed, angered, or offended. In other words, they voiced outrage over what they perceived to be an act of inexcusable extravagance. The Greek word *apoleia* (ah-POE-lee-ah) translated as “waste” in this passage, means destruction and implies utter ruin. The disciples’ focus on the realizable market value of this oil blinded them from seeing the significance of the Lord’s anointing. They had placed their commercial interest (“sold for much”) and social action (“given to the poor”) over personal devotion to the Lord (v. 9).

Matthew does not tell us that it was indeed Judas who championed or instigated this criticism (John 12:4–6). Through John, we get a clearer understanding of the real motive behind this pseudo-piety. Judas’ motivation was not concern for the “poor.” Instead, as treasurer of Jesus’ group and one who always stole from the purse, he needed abundant cash available to make his pilfering more difficult to detect. While venting frustration that was cloaked in the religious garb of caring for the materially poor, Judas was oblivious to the depth of his own spiritual poverty. How tragic it is when people who seem overly concerned about the material poverty of others are blinded to their own deeper spiritual poverty.

¹⁰ When Jesus understood it, he said unto them, Why trouble ye the woman? for she hath wrought a good work upon me. ¹¹ For ye have the poor always with you; but me ye have not always.

The construction of Jesus’ question here indicates the extent of the disciples’ indignation at this woman for what she had done. Apparently, they did not just express their opinions and then get on with dinner. They must have continued haranguing her with their diatribe and quite possibly with gestures also. The word translated as “trouble” is from *kopos* (KOE-po-ee), which means fatiguing work, labor, or a beating. The Lord’s rebuke seems to be intended to agitate the disciples’ minds and to cause them to think through their motivation for the harassment they were meting out to this woman. If they stopped to think about it, they would see the absurdity of not allowing the woman to express herself and her devotion with her own goods in the way she deemed fit.

Moreover, the Lord declares she had performed “a good work” for Him (Gk. *ergon kalon*, AIRgohn kah-LONE, meaning something good, noble, beautiful, or morally unobjectionable). We need discernment so that we will not call evil what the Lord calls good (see Isaiah 5:20).

“If helping beggars makes you feel good,” the Lord seems to be saying in verse 11, “then you have the poor always with you.” Nothing in this passage should be taken to imply that the Lord does not care for the poor or want His followers to care for the poor. Jesus understood and declared that an integral part of His ministry mandate was to preach the Gospel to the poor (cf. Luke 4:18). Throughout His earthly ministry, by His words and actions, Jesus demonstrated an overwhelming compassion and concern for those who were poor, whether materially or spiritually. The disciples’ error was that they were pitting social action against devotion to the Lord. Ministry of any kind should never be conceived of as independent or in place of personal devotion to the Lord. True compassion and justice flows from a personal relationship with and devotion to Him. The Lord continues, in essence, to say, “Seek the good, but Me you will not always have.” Jesus wanted the disciples to care for the poor, but to recognize that He was headed to His death on the cross and not criticize the woman for worshipping. The disciples should follow suit and honor Him while they had Him with them in the flesh.

¹² For in that she hath poured this ointment on my body, she did it for my burial. ¹³ Verily I say unto you, Wheresoever this gospel shall be preached in the whole world, there shall also this, that this woman hath done, be told for a memorial of her.

Jesus further explained the deeper significance of the Bethany woman’s action: She did it “for my burial” (Gk. *to entaphiasai me*, TOE en-ta-fee-AD-sie may, “to bury me”). This woman, whoever she was, understood what Jesus had been saying to His disciples about His imminent death. Jewish burial customs prescribed that dead bodies be anointed and prepared in special ways for burial. Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus eventually prepared Jesus’ body for burial by wrapping it in linen cloths (John 19:38–40). But unlike the other disciples, who were wrapped up in their own notions of a coming political kingdom and jostling for position in the kingdom (Luke 22:24–30; Acts 1:6–8), this woman was expressing her emotions and devotion. Jesus had been teaching that He would die and be raised from the dead on the third day. Perhaps she was the only one who really understood the true significance of what He taught.

Jesus’ death is a good message (Gk. *euaggelion*, ew-ang-GHEL-ee-on, Gospel; Matthew 26:13) because it announces the destruction of the power of sin, with all of sin’s anti-life manifestations. The Gospel is to be “preached” (Gk. *kerusso*, kay-ROO-so, proclaim, herald, announce) to “the whole world” (Gk. *en holo to kosmo*, en HOE-lo toe KOS-mo, “in the entire cosmos”). Christ was talking about worldwide evangelism when He declared that wherever the Gospel is preached in the whole world, the story of what this woman did would also be told as a “memorial” (Gk. *mnemosunon*, mnay-MOW-soo-non, remembrance) of her. Her prophetic action would be tied to the Gospel story because the Cross of Christ is the central message of the Gospel.

Daily Bible Readings

MONDAY

The Original Passover Celebration
(Exodus 12:1–14)

TUESDAY

Care for the Poor
(Luke 16:19–31)

WEDNESDAY

Mary Anoints Jesus' Body for Burial
(John 12:1–8)

THURSDAY

One Must Die for the Nation
(John 11:47–53)

FRIDAY

Judas Negotiates the Handover of Jesus
(Matthew 26:14–16)

SATURDAY

Jesus Celebrates the Last Passover Meal
(Matthew 26:17–29)

SUNDAY

Jesus Defends the Woman's Beautiful Act
(Matthew 26:1–13)