



**Adult Sunday School Lesson Summary for February 28, 2010  
Released on Wednesday, February 24, 2010**

**"Anointed by a Woman in Bethany"**

**Lesson Text:** Matthew 26:6-13

**Background Scripture:** Matthew 26:6-13

**Devotional Reading:** Deuteronomy 15:7-11

**Matthew 26:3-16**

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.  
14 Then one of the twelve, called Judas Iscariot, went unto the chief priests,  
15 And said unto them, What will ye give me, and I will deliver him unto you? And they covenanted with him for thirty pieces of silver.  
16 And from that time he sought opportunity to betray him.

**LESSON AIMS**

1. Summarize Mary of Bethany's anointing of Jesus.
2. Note the various attitudes toward Jesus represented in the people in today's text and compare them with the attitudes commonly held toward Jesus today.
3. Make a plan to "break the perfume jar" once for Jesus in the year ahead.

**INTRODUCTION**

**Moderation or Extremism?**

Moderation is generally wise. Most people think it is good not to be too heavy or too thin, too rich or too poor, too trusting or too skeptical. We generally seek some kind of balance.

But moderation is not best in everything. We have to agree that certain things in life demand extremes of devotion and effort.

For the Christian, what constitutes the right level of devotion to Jesus? Is there such a thing as too much service in His name? When we realize who Jesus is and what He has done for us, it is impossible for us to remain moderate in our response to Him. While some may want to be moderate in their relationship with Jesus, He calls for something more. Today's text demonstrates that.

## **LESSON BACKGROUND**

The story of Jesus' anointing at Bethany occurs in Matthew after a series of events in Jerusalem. Matthew frames the story of Jesus' anointing with a description of the religious leaders' plot against Jesus.

Many references in both the Old and New Testaments focus attention on the crucifixion of Christ. Comments were made by great prophets such as Isaiah and ordinary individuals such as Mary of Bethany. We need to perceive that the Lord was behind all of these views before, during, and after this most significant of all events.

Mary's act may not seem to have been crucial in comparison with other happenings. Yet Jesus said it would be told wherever the gospel would subsequently be preached in the whole world.

## **SOMETHING VIEWED AS A WASTE (Matthew 26:6-9)**

### **1. What events made Bethany a special place in Jesus' ministry?**

Jesus was now in Bethany. Bethany was a village located on the southeastern slope of the Mount of Olives on the road going from Jerusalem to Jericho. Its location was such that Jerusalem could not be seen even though it was only about two miles away. There are several places in the Gospels where we read of Jesus' connection with this village, but three events stand out above the others.

Bethany was the home of Lazarus, Mary, and Martha and was therefore where Lazarus was raised from death (John 11). Bethany was also the place where Jesus took His disciples when He was about to ascend back to heaven (Luke 24:50-51).

This week's lesson text looks at another significant incident in Bethany. Apparently, Jesus spent the nights in Bethany during this last week of His life (Matthew 21:17).

### **2. Who was hosting Jesus at this time, and who else was present (Matthew 26:6)?**

On this particular occasion, He was in the house of Simon the leper. Simon was probably one of those who had been healed by Jesus, and he had evidently invited Him in for supper (John 12:2). Jesus was sitting at the table—or, more accurately, reclining on a cushion in the common posture for eating. John also recorded that Martha served and Lazarus was there.

### **3. What occurred that caught everyone's attention, and what was the reaction of the disciples (vs. 7-9)?**

Neither Matthew nor Mark (14:3) identifies the woman who came with the alabaster box of ointment, but from John's Gospel, we learn that Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus, is the *woman* who anoints Jesus (John 12:1-8). Matthew omits these details, keeping the focus constantly on Jesus and His response.

The *ointment* is described as very valuable. (John 12:5 says it is worth about 300 day's wages.)

Mary anoints Jesus' *head* during the meal with this extravagantly expensive ointment. That reveals how highly she regarded Him. This is a most unusual action: a

woman is interrupting the men's meal to do this! Her action is unexpected, unconventional, and extravagant.

Matthew says it was the disciples who became indignant (26:8). Mark says "there were some that had indignation within themselves" (14:4). John points out Judas as the primary critic (12:4), emphasizing that he knew the exact value of the ointment and that his motivation was selfish. In the view of the critics, this use of such a costly ointment was a waste. Their explanation was that something that expensive could have been sold for a good price and the money used to benefit the poor people of the community.

#### **4. What do your choices regarding what you offer Christ and what you withhold from Him say about your Christian commitment?**

The woman's alabaster box probably was the most expensive thing she owned. Our own alabaster boxes may be the most expensive things we own as well, but they could also be where we spend most of our time or the relationships that are most dear to us.

Becoming fully devoted in our worship of and relationship with Jesus requires that we choose our priorities correctly (see Luke 14:26; 18:18-30; etc.). This involves releasing our attachment to things of fleeting or harmful value as we cultivate an eternal perspective. This is a lifelong process that involves asking ourselves "To whom do I owe the highest allegiance?" at every point.

#### **5. In doing what she did, what did Mary seem to understand better than everyone else who was there?**

What seems to be happening is a revelation of the fact that Mary was able to recognize who was present at the table that day, while the disciples were still deficient in their understanding. Her act was one of deep devotion and worship. Their attitude was one of doubt and criticism.

Mark 14:4 says that "Some of those present were saying indignantly to one another, 'Why this waste of perfume?'" What were Peter, James, and John thinking? In last week's lesson we noted the special revelation they received at Jesus' transfiguration. Surely they had a deeper understanding than the disciples who had not been present for that event.

How easily are we swayed in our attitudes by those who are unspiritual in their thinking? Nobody spoke up, including the three previously mentioned. Do we have our own solid convictions that enable us to stand for what is right, or are we easily led?

#### **SOMETHING VIEWED AS A MEMORIAL (Matthew 26:10-13)**

#### **6. What did Jesus say first when He became aware of what was being said about Mary by those present (Matthew 26:10)?**

When Jesus became aware of what was being said, He was unhappy and reprimanded His disciples for their attitude. In doing so, He expressed approval for Mary and her actions.

Mark 14:5 says that the disciples "rebuked her harshly." That's why when Jesus spoke to them, His first words were "Why trouble ye the woman?" In other words, they were to leave her alone at once and stop denigrating her. What she had done was a good thing, not a bad one, and it had been done for Him, not for them or anyone else. Her focus on Him was admirable.

Mary showed a depth of devotion for Jesus that too few believers today have. Throughout the law we read that when the children of Israel offered gifts and sacrifices to the Lord, they were to always offer the best. God said, "Whatsoever hath a blemish, that shall ye not offer: . . . And whosoever offereth a sacrifice of peace offerings . . . or a freewill offering . . . it shall be perfect to be accepted; there shall be no blemish therein" (Lev. 22:20-21). There are many other detailed instructions following these.

Such giving demonstrates depth of devotion on the part of the giver. Remember that when Jesus sat near the collection boxes one day, He saw rich people putting in large gifts. But what caught His attention was a poor widow who put in two small coins. His response to the disciples was "Verily I say unto you, That this poor widow hath cast more in, than all they which have cast into the treasury: for all they did cast in of their abundance; but she of her want did cast in all that she had, even all her living" (Mark 12:43-44).

What is our devotion level? Do we give the best of what we have, or do we give leftovers? Does God get back the first portion of your income? Do you use your talents and spiritual gifts to help further Jesus' cause of reaching out to people? Are you doing what James said when he wrote that a verbal testimony to having faith needs to be shown in doing good works (Jas. 2:14-24)? We need to let the deep-hearted devotion of Mary be a challenge to us and an incentive to grow in our love for and commitment to our Saviour.

### **7. How did Jesus answer their concern about selling the ointment and using the money for the poor (v. 11)?**

The first part of this verse is often mistaken as a statement of despair, as if Jesus is saying, "Because you can never eliminate poverty with charity, there is no point in helping *the poor*." However, nothing could be further from the case. Jesus is quoting from Deuteronomy 15:11 in the first part of this verse. That reminds the Israelites that caring for the poor is their duty in all generations. Jesus does not respond to the disciples' suggestion by denying that responsibility. The disciples are right in their concern for the poor.

However, as great as the responsibility to care for the poor is, Jesus points out something greater: Jesus was saying that His time with them was now becoming very short and their opportunities to be with Him and minister to Him would soon be gone. The poor, on the other hand, would still be there, and they would have continued opportunities to minister to them.

In a footnote to this verse in his study Bible, John MacArthur stated, "Jesus certainly was not disparaging ministry to the poor. . . . However, He revealed there that there is a higher priority than any other earthly ministry, and that is worship rendered to Him. This would have been utter blasphemy for anyone less than God, so yet again He was implicitly affirming His deity" (*MacArthur Study Bible*, Nelson).

### **8. How does Mary serve as an example for believers today (v. 12)?**

Mary serves as an example of being focused on the Lord. Our lives are busy and filled with many activities; yet our Father would have us focus primarily on Him and put all our other activities in the right perspective relative to that. Again, Mary had demonstrated that focus in anointing her Lord. Jesus said her action was an anointing for His "burial." What He says is shocking: He speaks of his own burial, and He is still very much alive!

This statement brings home the fact that Jesus stands in full control of His destiny. He knows very well that His death is drawing near. Yet He does nothing to prevent or avoid it. Speaking of it here, He shows that He will not die because He is conquered, but because He surrenders willingly.

Furthermore, we see just how clearly Jesus understands what will happen. At His death, His burial will be hasty and incomplete (Matthew 27:57-61). So He interprets this anointing as advance preparation for the burial to come. When the women return to the tomb to complete the preparation of Jesus' *body*, He already will have risen from the dead (Matthew 28:1-10).

## **9. What statement did Jesus make about Mary (v. 13)?**

This statement is the climax of the anointing story, as signaled by its solemn introduction *verily I say unto you*. For Christians who know well the story of Jesus' death and resurrection, it may seem unremarkable. But from the perspective of Jesus' disciples, it is most extraordinary and challenging.

We are used to associating the idea of the preaching of the *gospel* ("good news") with the entire story of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. But for the disciples before Jesus' resurrection, the good news is simply that God is about to bring His promised salvation to His people. How He will do that remains unclear at this point, but the faithful believe His promise that He will deliver them.

We also are accustomed to the idea that the preaching of the good news of Jesus is to be to *the whole world*. This idea also does not take shape for the disciples until after Jesus' resurrection. They know that God has promised to bless all nations (Genesis 22:18), but how this will happen they do not yet grasp.

But now Jesus announces that the good news is about to be *preached* to the whole world, and it has to do with His own death and burial. His death is so central to the plan of God to save the world that even this story about a woman anointing Jesus will be told as a part of that good news.

How true Jesus' statement about her being remembered has proved to be! After all, her simple act is recorded in three of the Gospels included in the Holy Bible read all over the world!

Now we can appreciate why the woman's extravagance is so fitting. She has captured a glimpse of something that we can see clearly from the other side of the cross. In the entire world there is none like Jesus. He is the one through whom God will save a people from every nation. He is the one who brings to reality God's purpose for the ages. And because He does that with His death, resurrection, and ascension, He will be with the disciples for only a brief time. To honor Him rightly, His followers need to recognize who He is and what He is doing, even as He reclines at the table with them.

### **PRACTICAL POINTS**

- 1.** Love and faith lead some to perform extraordinary acts of devotion that serve as examples for us all (Matthew 26:6,7).
- 2.** Whenever good is done, there will be the jealous, the critical, and the joyful (v. 8).
- 3.** Some pretend to think of the poor while their hearts are really selfish (v. 9).
- 4.** A good work is not something to be criticized (v. 10).
- 5.** Giving to poor is important; but honoring Jesus is of utmost importance (v. 11).
- 6.** Enduring greatness is found in a life sacrificed wholly in love for Jesus Christ (vs. 12,13).

### **CONCLUSION**

#### **Extravagant Devotion**

Like the woman who anointed Jesus, we need to realize that Jesus is the pinnacle of all that God has done in the world. God has given us the same responsibility that He gave to Israel: to care for those who have need (James 1:27; etc.). But the greatest need is to know the one who was God made flesh, living among us, dying for our sins, rising to conquer death. Today we can honor Him with extravagance like that of the woman who anointed Him. We do it not with expensive anointing oil, but with the extravagant devotion of our lives as we serve in His name.

It is sobering to realize how close we can come to Judas's action in selling out Jesus for a meager sum. We can spend all our time and energy trying to get ahead in life. In so doing, we end up taking the life that God gave us to pour out in Christ's service and trading it for a few pieces of silver.

Remember: "Whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it" (Matthew 16:25). There is no foolishness in the extravagant gift of our lives to the Christ who gave His life for us.

**PRAYER**

Lord, we stand amazed at what You have done for us. We want to pour ourselves out for You. Give us pure hearts to honor You with our thoughts and actions. May Your name be praised in our lives. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

**THOUGHT TO REMEMBER**

"What things were gain to me, those I counted loss for Christ" (Philippians 3:7).

**ANTICIPATING THE NEXT LESSON**

Next week's lesson starts with Jonah learning that God's concern for people extends further than he thought. Study Jonah 1:1-3 and 3:1-9.

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