

Extravagant Humility  
Matthew 26:1-16

How could those chief priests and elders have been so hostile to Jesus? How could Judas have gone so far as to sell Him out? Standing as we do on this side of the cross, we have a hard time understanding their motivations, let alone their tactics.

But we need to remember just how amazing, just how shocking Jesus' recent actions must have been to everyone in Jerusalem. Just a few days earlier, He had heard the Palm Sunday crowd calling Him the "Son of David," and He had refused to rebuke them. He had healed many of the blind and the lame, demonstrating His undeniable, supernatural power. And through His teaching, He had shown not only His mastery of the Old Testament Scriptures, but His uniquely authoritative way of interpreting them. Oh no, this was no mere wandering rabbi from Nazareth.

But what really got the chief priests and the elders so upset was the way He had challenged their power and position. For in His teaching, He had not only roundly condemned them for rejecting the testimony of John the Baptist. No, Jesus had also insisted that, because they refused to recognize Him as the Messiah, God would take away their nation. And of course, He had demonstrated His authority as the Son of David by throwing out all the businessmen the chief priests had permitted to set up shop in the courts of the Temple – the moneychangers and those who sold sacrificial animals.

And so as Jesus turned over the tables where they displayed their wares, He was overturning everything that the chief priests, the elders, the scribes, the Sadducees and the Pharisees believed. He was calling all their comfortable illusions into question, challenging all of their presuppositions, revealing all their errors and idols, all their faults and failures. And He was in a very real way claiming all of the authority they themselves had been so accustomed to wielding.

And maybe, just maybe, we can understand a little bit of their discomfort. Oh, sure, we know Who Jesus really is. We know that He wasn't just the human ruler the people of Jerusalem expected the Son of David to be. We know that He is also the Son of God, the One Whom John described in our responsive reading as the only source of light and life, of grace and truth. We know that Jesus is the living Word of God, the One through Whom God spoke the universe into existence.

And we know that everything Isaac Watts said about Jesus in our opening hymn is also true. We know Jesus is the great Prophet Who speaks the truth of God's plan of salvation to us. We also know that Jesus as our great High Priest is the One Who made that plan possible, offering as He did the sacrifice of Himself for the sins of all who would trust in Him. And we know that as our conqueror and our King, Jesus has every right to command our allegiance, to insist on our absolute obedience in every part of our lives.

Yes, we believe all that. But as we've studied through the Gospel of Matthew, have we found Jesus overturning any of our habits or beliefs? Have we found Jesus challenging any of the ways we think or feel, any of the things we do or say? Just how willing are we to love our enemies and do good to those who hate us? How ready are we to deny ourselves and take up our own crosses, dying to what we want so that others might see the self-sacrificial, unconditional love of Christ in us?

In short, how enthusiastic, how honest are we when we sing to Jesus, "Thine is the power; behold I sit in willing bonds beneath Thy feet?" Maybe we can understand a little bit of the pride of those chief priests after all, some of their unwillingness to let go of the authority they had claimed for themselves.

Oh, but surely we don't have anything in common with Judas! For even if we are sometimes hesitant to give Jesus complete control of our lives, surely we would never go so far as to sell Him out, and for so small a price! After all, those thirty pieces of silver would probably be worth less than \$300 today. Surely Judas should have valued a man who had been his teacher for three years, a man who had even allowed him to participate in His ministry of preaching and healing. After all, Judas had even been one of those who had served the crowd of 5000 families after Jesus had miraculously multiplied the five loaves and two fish – so surely Judas couldn't have doubted Jesus' ability to provide for him.

But it does seem that Judas, along with the rest of the disciples, had indeed fallen into the grip of materialism, an excessive focus on the things of this world. For notice how all the disciples responded to the woman who chose to anoint Jesus with a very expensive vial of perfume: what a waste, they said. Surely it would have made more sense to sell such a costly item and make a donation to the same sort of poor families that Jesus had fed with five loaves and two fish on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. In fact, Mark tells us that the perfume this woman chose to pour over Jesus would have cost some 300 denarii – almost a whole year's wages for a laborer, and thus a little over \$17,000 in today's money.

And again, we can understand their point of view, can't we? I mean, does it really make sense for us to spend so much time praying or reading Scripture when there are Habitat homes or wheelchair ramps that need to be built? After all, there are whole congregations, indeed whole denominations whose main focus is showing the love of Christ to the needy in tangible ways – the Salvation Army is perhaps the best known example, boasting 1.7 million members worldwide. As Bishop Walsham How said in our second hymn, isn't tending the lone and the fatherless doing angels' work below?

Of course helping the poor is important. But let's face it – there's a dark side to placing so much emphasis on the material needs people have. For by making this our main focus, as Judas and the rest of the disciples did, it's all too easy for us to look to Jesus only for what He can do for us in this world. After all, that's what the Palm Sunday crowd did, crying out to the Son of David to save them from their Roman oppressors. But when on the following Friday it had become obvious that Jesus would do no such thing, they cried out with equal vigor for Him to be crucified. Barabbas was the one they wanted to be released – such a violent insurrectionist was their idea of a Messiah.

So perhaps Jesus' gracious acceptance of this woman's very expensive gift was the last straw for Judas. Maybe Judas, just like the Jerusalem mob, just got tired of waiting for Jesus to solve what he considered to be the really important problems in life by bringing the freedom, the prosperity, and the happiness that they all craved. Maybe Judas just had no use for a Messiah who would do him no earthly good.

So, maybe Judas isn't so hard for us to understand after all. Maybe you are also getting tired of waiting for Jesus to solve your most urgent problems. Maybe you've been praying for a job or a raise, or for healing for yourself or a loved one. Maybe you're longing for relief from addiction or grief or depression. And maybe you're wondering what good it does to go on worshipping a God Who keeps allowing you to suffer.

So yes, it's hard to give up authority over our lives to Jesus. And yes, it's hard to keep on waiting for Jesus to answer our urgent prayers for worldly blessings. But there is one person in today's passage who didn't seem to have any problem doing any of that: the woman with the vial of perfume.

Now, as soon as she is introduced we want to know her backstory. And the parallel passage in John's gospel fills in some very important details: it turns out that her name is Mary. And this is the same Mary who sat at the feet of Jesus while her sister Martha was distracted with much serving (Luke 10:38-42). And this is the same Mary whose brother Lazarus Jesus raised from the dead (John 11:1-46).

Moreover, John tells us that Lazarus was present at the very dinner in the house of Simon the leper when Mary anointed Jesus with such precious perfume (John 12:1-3). So why do Matthew and Mark leave out such important details?

Well, contrary to the oh-so-sophisticated skeptical scholars, it's not because those details aren't true. No, because it's impossible to say everything about every subject, all historical writing involves two conscious decisions: what to include and what to leave out. So, could it be that Matthew and Mark chose to leave this woman's past murky and vague?

I think so, for knowing what John tells us about Mary, it would be very easy for us to explain away her extravagant gift. In fact, knowing more about Mary might actually feed our focus on worldly things: "Well of course she was grateful – her brother had been brought back to life from the dead. If Jesus answered my prayers in such an amazing way, of course I'd give Him everything I have. But He hasn't – so why should I put myself out?"

Moreover, knowing about Mary's personal history with Jesus might also increase our hesitance to surrender to His authority: "Well of course Mary humbled herself before Jesus in such a dramatic way – she had seen His absolute authority over death. But why should I surrender all that I am and all that I have to Him when He hasn't showed Himself strong in the things I need? How can I give Him complete control of my life if He isn't doing things the way I want?"

So, why does Matthew leave so much about Mary unsaid? By focusing solely on her actions instead of her backstory, he illustrates so clearly how her kind of humility puts the pride of the chief priests and the scribes to shame. Moreover, her extravagant gift to Jesus is the greatest condemnation of all the disciples' focus on the things of this world. And that's why Jesus says that it is what she did for Him that would be remembered forever – and Mary wouldn't have it any other way.

Yes, why Mary did what she did doesn't really matter, because the truth is that Jesus deserves such extravagant humility and devotion from everyone. And we should know that even better than she did, shouldn't we? For she didn't know she was anointing Jesus' body for burial. She didn't know that in just a few days Pilate would send Jesus to the cross at the behest of the chief priests and elders, with the active cooperation of Judas, and at least partially because the rest of His disciples abandoned Him. In fact, we know that all those who cling to their pride or who insist on material blessings from Jesus will eventually turn away from Him in disgust or disappointment.

But we also know that it is the cross of Christ that is the ultimate answer to the selfish materialism of the disciples – for there Jesus gave up so much more than expensive perfume, didn't He? He gave up all His blood and all His life, even for those who abandoned Him and denied Him.

And on the cross, as He humbled Himself before the Father and before those who despised and rejected Him, Jesus showed us just how vain, just how pointless, just how empty all human pride is. For it was only because of His total surrender to the will of His Father that He has been highly exalted, and given a name that is above every name.

Yes, it was because Jesus gave of Himself so humbly, so extravagantly, even for proud and worldly sinners like us, that every knee will bow before Him, that every tongue will confess Him as Lord. In short, because He laid down His life for all who trust in Him, everyone will eventually do exactly the same kind of thing Mary did in the house of Simon the Leper. For because of His cross, that's exactly what Jesus deserves from all of us – all that we are and all that we have.