

“Passionate Love”
Matthew 26:1-16
December 8, 2019

INTRODUCTION:

It may seem strange to you that on this second Sunday of Advent we are focusing on a passage that describes the events of Passion Week. The week of Jesus’ crucifixion is called “Passion Week” because of the sufferings of this week. The old meaning of the word “passion” is suffering. This is the reason Jesus came. Christmas happened so that Good Friday and Easter could happen.

As indicated by the sermon title, today’s passage begins Matthew’s description of Jesus’ passionate love. When I speak of his passionate love, I am not using the modern meaning of that word. We think of passion today as a strong emotion or desire, but its old meaning of suffering is what I have in view. We see the love of Jesus most fully through the lens of his suffering, and that’s the focus of the next two chapters of Matthew. So to speak of Jesus’ passionate love means his suffering love. In *Lament for a Son*, Nicolas Wolterstorff speaks of this suffering love. “The one who does not see God’s suffering does not see his love. God is suffering love. So suffering is down at the center of things, deep down where the meaning is. Suffering is the meaning of our world. For Love is the meaning. And love suffers. The tears of God are the meaning of history.”

Suffering is down at the center of things. Another way of saying that is to recognize that a measure of our love is our willingness to suffer for the ones we love. God is willing to suffer for us. But this also invites us to consider our love for God. Are we willing to suffer? Or to put it another way, what is Jesus worth to you? To the religious leaders, he was worth more dead than alive. To the woman who anointed him, he was worth all she had. To Judas, he was worth as much as Judas could get for him, which turned out to be only thirty pieces of silver.

I. The Suffering Love of Jesus – v. 1-5

We love because he first loved us, and there is no clearer demonstration of the love of God than in Jesus’ suffering and death on our behalf. Do you want to prize Jesus more highly? Do you want to regard him as a treasure more valuable than anything else this world has to offer? Do you want to love Jesus with all your heart? Then you must start here in his sufferings.

The opening phrase of our chapter marks a major transition in the ministry of Jesus. **“When Jesus had finished all these sayings,”** is a phrase that indicates that the teaching ministry of Jesus is now over, and he is beginning the next phase of his ministry, culminating in his crucifixion. Theologically, we summarize Jesus’ ministry as that of prophet, priest and king. A prophet speaks God’s words to man, and Jesus’ teaching ministry has been doing precisely that. But our hearts are such that we need more than a prophet teaching us what God has said. We need a priest who will offer sacrifices that will satisfy the demands of justice. That is what Jesus proceeds to do from this point forward in his ministry.

There are two words in verse 2 that speak of Jesus’ priestly ministry. The words are “Passover” and “delivered up.” Jesus was crucified on the Jewish Passover because he is the fulfillment of the Passover lamb of the Old Testament. It was Jesus’ decision to be sacrificed on this day to emphasize this very point. Notice that the Jewish leaders decided to wait until after the Passover to put Jesus to death. **“But they said, ‘Not during the feast, lest there be an uproar among the people’”** (v. 5). They determined to wait to arrest Jesus because they knew this could be an unpopular move. But God’s will always prevails, and it was God’s will that Jesus should die on Passover as the ultimate Passover Lamb. Passover celebrated God’s deliverance of Israel from their Egyptian bondage. He did so by sending the angel of death throughout Egypt to slay the firstborn from every family. But for his people, he provided protection from this avenging angel. If they would sacrifice a lamb and put the blood of the lamb on the doorpost of their house, the angel would see the blood and pass over their houses. The judgment of God moved through Egypt that night like a bulldozer through high weeds, and there was only one force powerful enough to resist it—a little lamb. Jesus is this Lamb.

The second word is one that is used throughout the next two chapters—“delivered up.” **“The Son of Man will be delivered up to be crucified.”** It is used 14 times in these two chapters. It would seem that everyone is delivering Jesus up to be crucified. Judas delivers him over to the high priests; the high priests deliver him to Pilate, Pilate to the soldiers and the soldiers deliver him to death. This is a word that is commonly associated in the Bible with God’s judgment. When Israel sinned in the period of the Old Testament judges, God delivered them into the hands of their enemies as an act of judgment. This same word is used in Romans 1 of God’s wrath being revealed in the form of delivering people to their own sinful desires. What is striking about this is that the New Testament teaches that it is ultimately God who delivers Jesus up for crucifixion. In his Acts 2 sermon, Peter said, **“this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by hands of lawless men”** (Acts 2:23).

This shows us that Jesus is not only a prophet and priest, but also a king. It is his will that prevails. He dies on Passover because he wills it to be so, in

spite of the desires of the rulers. It was their will to keep his arrest quiet. Ironically, his arrest and crucifixion is probably the most well-known fact of all of human history. And Matthew opens the passage with a powerful reminder of this through Jesus' prediction of his crucifixion. Don't miss the importance of the little word "then" at the beginning of verse 3. Jesus speaks his predicting word, "then" the rulers gathered and plan his arrest and crucifixion. Jesus spoke his crucifixion into existence just as he spoke the world into existence.

Jesus is our prophet, priest and king. As such, he is God's only solution to what is really our only enduring problem, the problem of sin. What is your solution to the sin problem? Those who don't accept God's solution inevitably resort to some self-oriented solution. The main three are self-deception, self-comparison or self-payment. Self-deception says, "I have no sin deserving of judgment." Self-comparison says, "I may have some sin—after all, no one's perfect. But at least I don't sin as much as others." Self-payment says, "I have really blown it, and now I need to make up for that myself." The specific form of payment can take many different forms. Sometimes it's the form of self-pity, wanting to feel bad to pay for your sin. None of these solutions work. But God's solution for our sin is certain to work precisely because it is God's solution.

II. The Suffering Love of a Woman – v. 6-13

We love because he first loved us, and the woman at Bethany loves Jesus in a way Jesus applauds. She anoints him with a flask of very expensive ointment, identified in John's Gospel as worth 300 denarii (John 12:5), or about a year's salary. This anointing takes place in Bethany, in the home of Simon the leper. The first miracle Matthew records is the healing of a leper (8:2-4). Since the Old Testament prohibited people from entering the home of lepers (Lev. 13:45-46), it is likely that Simon is a former leper who has been healed by Jesus. And the woman is identified in John's Gospel as Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus. John also mentions that Lazarus is present, and this all happened after he had been raised from the dead by Jesus. So there are many present here who are very grateful for Jesus.

When this woman pours the ointment on Jesus, she is criticized by the disciples. This was no mild criticism, for Matthew tells us that they were indignant. In anger, they scolded her and told her that the expensive ointment would have been better used had it been sold and the proceeds given to the poor. Jesus disagrees, saying, **"Why do you trouble the woman? For she has done a beautiful thing to me. For you always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me"** (v. 10-11). Some have used this verse to diminish the importance of ministry to the poor. They read the verse as saying that such ministry is futile because it will prove ineffective in resolving the problem of poverty. No matter what you do, it won't eliminate poverty. That is clearly not what Jesus is saying. He is quoting from Deuteronomy 15:11, which

says, **“For there will never cease to be poor in the land. Therefore I command you, ‘You shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy and to the poor, in your land.’”** It is clear throughout the entire Bible and in the teaching of Jesus that ministry to the poor should have a top priority for God’s people. What, then, is Jesus’ point? He is saying that there is something with higher priority than the high priority of ministry to the poor, and that is to honor Jesus through our love for him. When ministry *for* Jesus takes priority over the love *of* Jesus, we have lost our way.

A curious thing about this story is that Matthew doesn’t name this woman, even though he certainly knew who it was. And then he quotes Jesus as saying that **“wherever this gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will also be told in memory of her”** (v. 13). Matthew’s withholding of her name is his way of highlighting her loving act for Jesus. So this story invites an application. How much is Jesus worth to you? This woman alone seems to have the right answer in valuing him as a priceless treasure. There is an extravagant recklessness about her actions that is entirely appropriate. The greatest treasure of the universe, the God-man Jesus, has given himself for her. Such a gift is indeed priceless.

The disciples didn’t share this view, and their response, if you think about it, was deeply painful. After the woman had given her valuable gift, they respond, **“Why this waste?”** Imagine receiving an extravagant Christmas gift from someone who loves you deeply, after which everyone else in the room exclaims, “What a waste!” They didn’t value Jesus as they should have. But Jesus is gentle and patient, and with the exception of Judas, they all learned later to value Jesus like this woman. How about you? Have you learned to love Jesus? Have you ever had one of those moments in which your heart has been touched by the grace, the love and the goodness of Jesus so that you want to respond, “Thank you Jesus. I love you.” To the degree that you have, you are experiencing the joy of heaven, because heaven will be all about God’s continuing self-giving love for us, and our response in loving him.

III. The Self-Trusting Hatred of Judas – v. 14-16

The final paragraph in our passage should serve as a sobering warning to us all. Judas betrays Jesus for thirty pieces of silver. Here is one who had walked with Jesus for over three years, heard his sermons, witnessed his many miracles, even seen him raise the dead. And yet I don’t think it’s too harsh to say that at the end of all that, he hated Jesus. Mere disillusionment would lead to abandonment of Jesus, not betrayal. An act of betrayal comes from active hatred. Why did Judas hate Jesus?

The text gives us two hints. The first is the word “then” at the beginning of verse 14, a word that ties this to the previous account of Jesus’ anointing by

this woman. Judas doesn't approve of Jesus' actions with the woman. He doesn't want a leader who emphasizes love. He wants one who will take action. In short, Judas hadn't learned to trust the ways of Jesus. He thought he knew better.

The second hint is in the fact that he approached the chief priests and asked the question, **“What will you give me if I deliver him over to you?”** Judas was all about the money. He was greedy and covetous. This is even clearer in John's account of this event. He reports that Judas was the leading voice of criticism of the woman's anointing, and then adds that Judas wasn't really that concerned for the poor. **“He said this, not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief, and having charge of the moneybag he used to help himself to what was put into it”** (John 12:6). Calvin said, “Note especially that greed was the cause and origin of Judas's terrible blindness: obviously Paul was right to call it the root of all evils (1 Tim 6:10).” And what is greed but self-trust? It believes in the power of money, and Judas trusted in that power more than in Jesus and his ways.

CONCLUSION:

The sobering truth about these stories is that they make it clear that all of us are headed for one of two destinies, to love Jesus or to hate him. There is no middle way. Do you remember the O'Henry short story, “The Gift of the Magi”? Jim and Della Dillingham are a poor young couple who each have a prized possession. Jim's is an heirloom pocket watch owned by his father and grandfather before him, and Della's is her beautiful, long hair. After paying the bills, Della has \$1.87 left to buy Jim his Christmas present. She has had her eye on a gold watch chain for his pocket watch, but it cost \$21. In her love for Jim, she decides to sell what is precious to her, her hair, in order to raise the money for the gift. When she comes home and sees the mess her beautiful hair has become, O'Henry describes the scene. “She started to try to cover the sad marks of what she had done. Love and large-hearted giving, when added together, can leave deep marks.” When Jim comes home and sees her shortened hair, he reveals his present to her. He has sold his watch in order to buy expensive hair combs for her beautiful hair. O'Henry concludes like this.

The magi, as you know, were wise men—wonderfully wise men—who brought gifts to the newborn Christ-child. They were the first to give Christmas gifts. Being wise, their gifts were doubtless wise ones. And here I have told you the story of two children who were not wise. Each sold the most valuable thing he owned in order to buy a gift for the other. But let me speak a last word to the wise of these days: Of all who give gifts, these two were the most wise. Of all who give and receive gifts, such as they are the most wise. Everywhere they are the wise ones. They are the magi.