

SERIES: The Good News, as Reported by Matthew

SERMON: *Broken and Spilled Out*

SCRIPTURE: Matthew 26:1-16

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One of America's finest short stories, written by the great master of the art, O. Henry, is a moving story called, "The Gift of the Magi." A young couple, Della and Jim, were very poor, but very much in love. Each had one unique possession. For Della it was her hair, which served almost as a robe when she let it down. Jim, on the other hand, had a pocket watch, given to him by his father, which was his pride and joy.

It was the day before Christmas and Della had only \$1.87 to buy Jim a present. So she went out and sold her hair for \$20. With the proceeds she bought a platinum chain for Jim's precious watch. When Jim came home that night and saw Della's short hair he was stupefied. It was not that he loved her any less; for she was lovelier than ever. Slowly he handed her his gift—it was a set of expensive tortoise-shell combs with jeweled edges for her lovely hair—he had sold his gold watch to buy them. Each had given to the other all there was to give. Real love knows no other way.

What is just a story in the *Gift of the Magi* becomes a profound truth in Matthew 26. Let's read Matthew's account of this scene, but we will include the brief paragraphs before and after in order to get the full impact of the story. Matthew 26:1-16:

When Jesus had finished saying all these things (referring undoubtedly to the Olivet Discourse we have studied in Matthew 24-25), 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."

Then the chief priests and the elders of the people assembled in the palace of the high priest, whose name was Caiaphas, and they plotted to arrest Jesus in some sly way and kill him. "But not during the Feast," they said, "or there may be a riot among the people."

While Jesus was in Bethany in the home of a man known as 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.

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.:"

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. When she poured this perfume on my body, she did it to prepare me for burial. I tell you the truth, wherever this gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her."

When 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 hand him over to you?" So they counted out for him thirty silver coins. From then on Judas watched for an opportunity to hand

him over.

We are fast closing in on the last hours of Jesus' life. His enemies are plotting his demise and one of His disciples is plotting His betrayal. In between these two schemes we find Jesus in Bethany where His dearest friends on earth live—Mary, Martha, and Lazarus—and He is visiting in the home of a man known as Simon the Leper. Lepers were required to be isolated from the rest of society, so Simon must be a former leper. I think it is likely that he is one whom Jesus had healed, and this dinner may be his way of saying thanks.

All four Gospels contain the story of a woman anointing Jesus. Matthew's account occurs during Passion Week, and Mark and John tell the same story from their own perspective, but Luke's account is a clearly separate incident that happens early in His ministry. While in both cases Jesus is in the home of a man named Simon, in the Luke account he is Simon the Pharisee, in the others it is Simon the Leper (the name was a very common one). In Luke it is a sinful woman, apparently a street walker, who anoints him; here it is Mary of Bethany.

I see three themes developed by Matthew and his counterparts, Mark and John: The unbounded love of Mary, the unmitigated hypocrisy of Judas, and the unconditional vindication of Mary by Jesus.

The unbounded love of Mary (26:6-7)

Her worshipful attitude. Mary is not named in Matthew's Gospel—he simply refers to her as “a woman,” but John tells us the woman is Mary of Bethany. She appears prominently in three different NT scenes, and every time she is at the feet of Jesus. Here we find her in the familiar posture of worship. John tells us that she is doing this while her sister Martha serves the dinner (12:2). This is not the first time, of course, that the difference between these two sisters is highlighted. In Luke 10 an incident is discussed which happened much earlier in Jesus' ministry (Luke 10:38-42):

“As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said. But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, 'Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!'”

“Martha, Martha,” the Lord answered, “you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.”

Martha is not chided by John in his account of this anointing, which makes me think that perhaps she has learned a lesson from the earlier experience. She hasn't quit serving, for she has the gift of service, but at least she is no longer fretting and stewing and complaining. Nevertheless, there is clearly a special commendation for the spirit and attitude of Mary in this story. She has struck a spiritual chord in Jesus' heart, and it would behoove each of us to seek to imitate her worshipful attitude.

Her unselfishness is noted in verse 7: “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.” The value of this vial of perfume is difficult to determine accurately, but it was significant. The disciples give us a hint when they say in verse 9 that it could have been sold at a high price, and Judas is even more specific when he says in John 12:5 that it could have been sold for a year's wages (300 denarii in Greek).

A denarius was a common laborer's wage for one day. If that translates into a wage of \$8-12 an hour today, the value of this perfume would be perhaps \$15-25,000 in today's dollars. Why so expensive? Because nard was an herb grown in the high pasture land of the Himalayas. Its difficult cultivation and distant transportation made it more expensive than any synthetic perfume on the market today.

I think the only way to explain this extravagant act of unselfishness is the deep and abiding love Mary had for her Savior. She did not look at the price tag; she did not examine other less-expensive alternatives; she did not consider her own future. She loved Jesus, so she gave to Him the most precious and costly possession she had on earth. We must not miss the fact that Mary did not offer this gift to support a program or a ministry but offered it to Jesus Himself. Nor did she selfishly seek some visible and tangible result from her generosity but rather sought simply to show Jesus how much she adored him.

May I take a moment to encourage all of us to evaluate the level of sacrifice we are making for Jesus? Let's not think just about our giving; let's talk instead about what we're keeping, what we're spending, and how we're serving. When is the last time we engaged in a genuinely sacrificial act of love toward Jesus? When is the last time we gave from our assets instead of our income? When is the last time we sacrificed a really important personal prerogative, like a week of vacation, in order to serve God?

Her humility. While Matthew and Mark tell us that Mary poured the perfume on Jesus' head, John adds that she poured it on His feet and then wiped his feet with her hair. This was an act of great humility, all the more striking in that a Jewish lady never unbound her hair in public. To do so was viewed as a mark of loose morals.¹ But Mary refused to calculate public opinion. Her heart went out to the Lord and she cared not what anyone thought of her action. It was enough that she knew her own heart to be right.

In contrast to Mary there are many who come to worship with far more time and attention devoted to getting their hair ready than to getting their hearts ready, whose clothes are of far greater value than their offerings. Mary of Bethany's humility enabled her to set one of the finest examples in all of Scripture of unbounded love.

The unmitigated hypocrisy of Judas (8-9)

You might object that Judas isn't even mentioned in our passage until verse 14, and that's after

the story is concluded. But while Matthew attributes the words of verse 8 to all the disciples, the Apostle John tells us that Judas is the spokesman. And, while the disciples are clearly short-sighted in agreeing with Judas, he is downright hypocritical, for reasons we will explain in a moment.

Judas is an awful enigma in Scripture. He wasn't a bum off the streets, he wasn't from the ranks of the cynical scribes and Pharisees, nor was he ignorant of who Jesus was or what He stood for. No, he was one of the chosen Twelve, who walked with Him for 3 ½ years, saw Him perform mighty deeds of mercy, and heard His great discourses! And still he would betray Him! The lesson in this seems to be that one may be very close to the Lord and to other Christians, yet far from away spiritually.

One looks in vain for clues as to when and how Judas went bad. Was he always a phony or was there a time when his intentions were honorable? I don't know, but John 12:6 tells us that Judas' downfall was not sudden but rather gradual. It says he was an habitual thief, and this information helps us understand his contention in regard to Mary's unbounded love.

His contention. “Why this waste?” they asked (Judas speaking, with the approval of the others). “This perfume could have been sold at a high price and the money given to the poor.” Klass Schilder writes perceptively, “One can begin to smell Hell's foulest vapors mingling with the incense of the perfume.”

But setting aside for a moment the fact that Judas is the Betrayer, how would you evaluate his reasoning? Be honest now! Actually it sounds pretty good, doesn't it? Looking at the situation objectively, \$15-25,000 would feed quite a few people or even house several homeless families for a year. Frankly, I think Judas' contention in the abstract has much to commend it. In fact, we as Christians have to be constantly evaluating our expenditures, not just on the basis of whether we can afford them but also on whether that money might be better used in another way.ⁱⁱ

And this problem faces us not only in our personal lives but also in regard to our church life. We should be asking some hard questions. Should the church be spending money to refurbish buildings, as we did with the Shine Wing, to spruce up our curb appeal, as we plan to do starting next month, or to hire new staff such as a Chinese pastor when there are Christians in North Korea don't even have enough food, when in East Africa there may be only one trained pastor for 50,000 people, and when some people in our own congregation are getting laid off? Maybe; maybe not. A lot depends on motives. If our goal is to selfishly make life easier and more comfortable for ourselves while turning a deaf ear to the needs around us, then no. But if our goal is to more effectively reach out to the people where God has planted us, right here in northeast Wichita, perhaps so.

In 1965 our church of fewer than 100 worshiped in a little white frame building at 10th and Oliver (you can still see the building there) on a quarter acre lot. A few of you remember those days; they were good days. Some visionary people in the congregation wanted to move out to the northeast edge of town—way out near 21st and Woodlawn where there was nothing but cornfields

at the time, buy 3 acres, and build a facility that would allow for growth. But others said, “No, we can't consider that in view of the enormous needs on the mission field.” The church voted to move and several of the families who were opposed to the move left the church.

The new location proved to be strategic as the city moved in this direction, and God eventually enabled us to expand this campus to about ten acres. Today we are a church of 1000 in average attendance, we have three daughter churches in Wichita, a granddaughter church in Goddard, and a dozen more church plants in nearby communities, and we have a mission budget of a half million dollars per year. There are literally dozens of missionaries and pastors in the ministry today who grew up in this church and were launched by this congregation.

Now tell me, was that expenditure on three acres and a new building blessed of God or was it an act of foolishness? Of course, we must be careful, because there are just as many stories of extravagant expenditures in the name of God that became everlasting boondoggles. Witness hundreds of cathedrals in Europe, built on the backs of poverty-stricken masses and standing all but vacant today—nothing more than mausoleums. I read recently that 10,000 church buildings are currently for sale just in the country of Italy, because they are no longer needed.

Witness the City of Faith Medical and Research Center, completed by Oral Roberts in 1981 and closed just eight years later, bankrupt. Today the building is still the tallest in Tulsa, but it is an office building called CityPlex Towers. Witness Jimmy Bakker's Heritage USA, at one time the third-most successful theme park in the country. The investors got \$6.54 for each \$1000 invested and the property has been sold off to a number of organizations.

Steps of faith can sometimes be very hard to distinguish from acts of foolishness.

So, what was wrong with Judas' contention about the poor? We can see the answer when we examine his greed.

His greed. Judas, you see, was the treasurer of the Twelve Apostles and he habitually pilfered from the money box. Greed was the temptation which led to Judas' criticism of Mary and eventually to his betrayal of Christ. He wasn't concerned about the poor; he was concerned about Judas, and the more money that went into the money box, the more ended up in his personal bank account.

We see here one of the laws of temptation, namely: “Temptation commonly comes through that for which we are naturally fitted.” If a person is fitted to handle money, as Judas apparently was, his temptation may be to regard money as the most important thing in the world, a god. The same thing can happen in regard to good looks, a beautiful voice, public speaking, or any other special gift or talent.

By the way, are you aware how often people embezzle from the Lord's work, as Judas regularly did? I belong to the K-Club, which consists of all the Free Church pastors of churches over 1000; there are about 65 of us. Over the past month three of them have shared sad stories about staff

members or volunteers embezzling sizeable amounts of money from their churches. You don't hear about this often because the churches are embarrassed, or they are trying to protect the individual from public humiliation. But it happens a lot more than you might think. (By the way, I have been assured by our Trustees that we have multiple layers of checks and balances to prevent that from happening here at First Free, but if you have any doubt about how money is being handled, please challenge us).

But did you know that far more common than embezzlement by a staff member (and far more costly in terms of the dollars involved) is the problem of people pilfering from the offering plate every Sunday? Maybe you hadn't noticed that? Well, you wouldn't, because people pilfer not by what they take out but by what they fail to put in. In Malachi 3 God says to the Jewish people: "'You are robbing me, the whole nation of you.' But you say, 'How have we robbed you?' 'In tithes and offerings.'"

A spirit of greed and materialism is very often the first step toward betrayal. There are things we really want, and we conclude we can't have them unless we cut something else out, and often giving is the easiest thing to cut.

So far we have seen a confrontation break the peace of this intimate supper. Mary has performed a deed of unbounded love while Judas has shown unmitigated hypocrisy.

The unconditional vindication of Mary by Jesus (10-13).

His rebuke of the disciples. Jesus says, "Why are you bothering this woman?" Dr. S. Lewis Johnson, one of my favorite seminary professors, told us one day in class, "Over the years a great deal has been made over the question of apostolic succession by certain churches, but I would rather be in Mary's succession than in the succession of the whole crowd of the apostles on this occasion." They deserve to be rebuked.

His recognition and justification of Mary's beautiful act. He says in verse 10, "She has done a beautiful thing to me. . . ." There is no second-guessing, no criticism at all coming from the lips of Jesus, but only praise. And He tells us why. In fact, He provides two justifications of her actions.

His first justification: "The poor you will always have with you, but you will not always have me." To some, Jesus' words seem harsh and lacking in compassion. But rightly understood they are not that at all. Jesus is not saying that the poor are unimportant, nor that the Church has no responsibility to them. His whole life was spent reaching out to the poor, the lepers, and the demon-possessed. In fact, it was just last Sunday that we saw His incredible concern for the least, the last, and the lost—so much so that he told His disciples that "whatever you did or did not do for one of the least of these, you did or did not do for me."

Rather He is refuting any utopian dreams that poverty can be eliminated in this age; such notions are a sad misunderstanding of human nature. But even more importantly, He is stressing the

primacy of the spiritual over the material and social. At this very time, just hours before His crucifixion and death, worshiping Him and anointing Him are more important than the care of the poor, for the time for acts of devotion to Him is much shorter than they realize. This is not the time for philanthropy but adoration, not the time for charity but for worship.ⁱⁱⁱ John MacArthur writes,

Genuine worship is the supreme service a Christian can offer to Christ. There is a time for ministering to the poor, the sick, the naked, and the imprisoned. There is a time for witnessing to the lost and seeking to lead them to the Savior. There is a time for discipling new believers and helping them grow in the faith. There is a time for careful study and teaching of God's Word. But above all else that the Lord requires of His people is their true worship, without which everything else they may do in His name is empty and powerless.^{iv}

We can also learn the important lesson that the opportunity to show devotion does not always wait until we get ready to exercise it. How often are we seized with the desire to do something fine and generous, but we put it off? And the fine impulse goes away and the thing never gets done. How many times have I heard a person say at a funeral, "But I was *intending* to visit him"? Mary seized the opportunity while there was time, and Jesus vindicated her for it.

His second justification for her act: "When she poured this perfume on my body, she did it to prepare me for burial." This is the true significance of what Mary did, whether or not she even understood it entirely. I am certain the disciples have not yet grasped the reality that Jesus is about to die, though He has hinted at such multiple times and even stated it bluntly. Perhaps Mary alone understands and is taking the only opportunity she might ever have to anoint His body for burial.

His incredible tribute to her. Verse 13: "I tell you the truth, wherever this gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her." For over 2,000 years now countless sermons have been preached about Mary, beautiful songs have been written about her (we sang one this morning), multitudes have been inspired by her to worship Jesus more extravagantly. There is no doubt that Jesus' prediction here has been fulfilled.

In conclusion I want to share with you three principles from this passage which deserve application to our lives today.

Principles to Ponder:

1. Love considers no sacrifice too great to contemplate. Would you like to have your love for Jesus Christ measured by the degree to which you have personally made sacrifices for Him? Love is not love if it nicely calculates the cost. It gives its all and its only regret is that it has not still more to give.

2. Hypocrisy considers no quality too honorable to imitate. Are you surprised when you find hypocrites in the church or even in the pulpit? You shouldn't be, for the worst hypocrite of all

was one of the Twelve! Perhaps instead of looking for hypocrites in the next pew we should each ask what the disciples asked when Jesus told them that one of them would betray Him, “Is it I, Lord? Is it I?”

3. Jealousy considers no rival too sacred to eliminate. Earlier in the service we read the paragraph that precedes the anointing of Jesus, as well as the one that follows. I turn your attention back there. In verses 3-5 we find the religious leaders of Israel at the home of Caiaphas, plotting to arrest Jesus and kill Him, though of course they want to wait until the religious feast is over, because you don’t want to commit murder on Passover!

And in verse 14-16 we find Judas agreeing to sell Jesus out to them for 30 silver coins. Why were the religious leaders willing to do this? There are probably many reasons, but surely jealousy is primary—jealousy of the intense following Jesus has earned, a following that threatens their power and their place. The apostle John states this explicitly in John 12:9-11:

“Meanwhile a large crowd of Jews found out that Jesus was there (in Bethany at the home of Simon the leper) and came, not only because of him but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. So the chief priests made plans to kill Lazarus as well, for on account of him many of the Jews were going over to Jesus and putting their faith in him.”

The enemies of Jesus are willing to eliminate both Lazarus and Jesus because of this jealousy. Are you surprised when the Lord's enemies oppose you personally and persecute you? You shouldn't be, for Satan is jealous of your commitment to Christ, and the better witness you are the harder he will try to eliminate you.

Conclusion: The movie *Schindler's List* narrates a story set in one of the darkest eras of human history. The movie is haunting and disturbing but also hopeful, because *Schindler's List* is a story of a man who sacrifices almost all of his wealth to save the lives of over 1200 Jews from the Nazi holocaust. After the liberation by the allies, there is a powerful scene where Oscar Schindler breaks down and cries, “I could have done more. If I hadn't driven this car, I could have saved more.”

Yes, perhaps so, but as noble and great as Schindler’s deeds were on the human level, saving so many human lives (and who could not admire him for it?), there is no indication that he was a believer, a true worshiper, or that he understood the far greater need of saving human souls. That movie is a temporary memorial to him, and a fitting one, but it doesn’t compare with the permanent memorial to Mary of Bethany.

Jesus said back in chapter 16: “What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world (or saves thousands of lives), yet forfeits his soul?” And Paul speaks those familiar words, “If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing.” I think he’s speaking primarily about love for others, but what he says is true also of love for the Lord.

God is looking for those who are . . .

*Broken and spilled out
Just for love of You, Jesus.
My own precious treasure
Lavished on Thee.
Broken and spilled out
And poured at Your feet
In sweet abandon
Let me be spilled out
And used up for Thee.*

Let's pray. Thank you, Father, for the amazing example of Mary of Bethany, who loved the Lord Jesus with unbounded love. Teach us the right balance between frugality and extravagance. Teach us when to be activists for truth and justice and when to be quiet worshipers. In Jesus' name, Amen.

i. A Rabbinic passage indicates how careful Jewish women were about this: "Kamitha had seven sons, who all performed the office of high-priests; they ask of her how she came to this honor? She answered, 'The rafters of my house never saw the hairs of my head.'" I doubt if this really had anything to do with her sons' success, but it shows how important it was to Jewish women to never let their hair down.

ii. By the way, there was a most interesting tradition in the early church that I came across while reading the NT apocrypha. In one of these apocryphal books entitled, *The First Gospel of the Infancy of Jesus Christ*, chapter 2, verse 1 we read:

And when the time of his circumcision was come, namely the eighth day, on which the law commanded the child to be circumcised, they circumcised him in the cave. And the old Hebrew woman took the foreskin and preserved it in an alabaster-box of old oil of spikenard. And she had a son who was a druggist, to whom she said, "Take heed thou sell not this alabaster-box of spikenard-ointment, although thou shouldst be offered 300 denarii for it." Now this is that alabaster-box which Mary the sinner procured, and poured forth the ointment out of it upon the head and the feet of our Lord Jesus Christ, and wiped it off with the hairs of her head.

Now I hasten to say that no scholar takes this legend seriously (and the account even confuses Mary Magdalen with Mary of Bethany), but it does demonstrate the concern some early Christians had to provide justification for Mary's choice to pour the perfume upon Jesus instead of selling it.

iii. John MacArthur, *Matthew 24-28*, 135.

iv. MacArthur, 135.