

Called to Remember

Spring Quarter: Discipleship and Mission

Unit 2: Call to Ministry

Sunday school lesson for the week of April 14, 2019

By Dr. Hal Brady

Lesson Scripture: Matthew 26:1-13

Key Verse: Matthew 26:13

Lesson Aims

1. Locate events within Jesus' final week.
2. Contrast the religious leaders' hostility toward Jesus with Mary's expression of love for him.

It is reported that back in 1912 President William Howard Taft was attending a Washington Senators baseball game. After the top of the seventh inning was completed, Taft (a rather large man) was feeling a bit tired, so he stood up to stretch. On seeing the President of the United States stand, those nearby did the same. Soon everyone in the ball park was standing. Thus began a tradition that is still observed at baseball games today: the seventh-inning stretch.

Now, President Taft had no intention of creating a tradition. All he wanted to do was take a break from sitting. Yet his simple act had lasting consequences. And the same is true of the woman in today's lesson. For sure, she did not intend for her act to be "noted in history," but it was and is. In referring to her act, Jesus said in our 'key verse,' "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" (Matthew 26:13).

Before proceeding, let's look at the lesson's context, which is the Passover. The Passover was and still is one of the most important Jewish festivals. Jews celebrate it to commemorate their liberation from slavery in ancient Egypt. To encourage Pharaoh to release the Jews, God sent 10 plagues upon the Egyptians. The last and most horrible of the plagues was the death of Egypt's firstborn. In order to be spared, the Jews were instructed to mark their doorposts with the blood of a slaughtered spring lamb. When this sign was present, the death angel would pass over their home and spare their firstborn.

As we are aware, today is Palm Sunday, the day we remember Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem (John 12:13). That event occurred early in the time frame of what has come to be called Passion week or Jesus' final week. The teachings and events of this week are so important that more than a third of Matthew's Gospel centers on just these few days. And it is likely that the Passion narrative was the first part of the Gospel story that was put together in some organized fashion.

Our lesson today takes us about midway into this week, after Jesus and many others have already arrived in Jerusalem for the Feast of the Passover. The origin of this single-day observance and the weeklong Feast of Unleavened Bread that accompanies it can be found in several Old Testament scripture passages (example, see Exodus 12:6, 15-20, 43-49).

Jesus is Hated (Matthew (26:1-5))

Matthew 24 and 25 records the fifth and final discourse or “sermon” of Jesus in this Gospel. The phrase “all these things” in verse one of our text refers to Jesus’ teaching in these two previous chapters concerning the distant future.

Having finished his Olivet Discourse, Jesus spends that evening again in Bethany, where they spent each evening of Holy Week (Matthew 21:1,17). In just two days they will go back to Jerusalem for the final hours of Jesus’ earthly life and mission. Speaking in dramatic fashion, Jesus declares to his disciples, “As you know, the Passover is two days away – and the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified (Matthew 26:2).

Jesus has spoken to his disciples of his coming death at least three times to this point (Matthew 16:21; 17:22, 23; 20:17-19). Two of those three times included, as here, predictions of betrayal and crucifixion.

Although this prediction before us is briefer than the others, Jesus connects his death with the celebration of Passover. Later, Paul recognizes the spiritual significance by referring to Jesus as “our Passover Lamb” (I Corinthians 5:7).

The phrase “Son of Man” is the most used designation for Jesus in the Gospels (about 80 times) other than the name “Jesus” itself (which occurs more than 900 times).

While Matthew informs us that it was the chief priests and elders of the people who gathered in Caiaphas’ courtyard to plot against Jesus, Mark writes that it was the chief priests and legal experts, as does Luke.

At any rate, Joseph Caiaphas, his full name, was the high priest. He was the son-in-law of Annas, who had also served as high priest A.D. 6-15, and had managed to keep that office of high priest in his family. Obviously, Annas still wielded much influence.

Caiaphas, however, was appointed high priest in A.D. 18 by the Roman prefect Valerius Gratus, Pontius Pilate’s predecessor. He maintained the position until he was deposed in A.D. 36 by Roman authorities. Because the Roman governor appointed and deposed the high priests, the office was essentially a political one and apparently Caiaphas was a shrewd politician and knew how to manipulate it well. And, of course, since the high priests were under the rule of the Romans, the people serving in this position had to keep Rome satisfied with their performance. There could be no upheaval whatsoever.

Now, to meet where the high priest resides rather than in the temple area where the council normally convenes may be attributed to the secretive nature of what is being discussed. One theory is that the meeting is held here in the event that it lasts well into the night, since night meetings are not allowed in the temple area.

The group plotting to kill Jesus agreed that it would not be wise to arrest him during the Passover. Thousands of Jews who had been dispersed to other parts of this world would return to their homeland during this important time. Moreover, there was a tradition that the Messiah would appear during Passover.

In addition, Matthew tells us that Jesus' presence in the city had already caused an uproar: "When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred up" (Matthew 21:10). And any rebellion by the people would have meant Caiaphas' job as high priest.

Therefore, when Judas later went to Caiaphas with his offer, the high priest realized it was an opportunity that could not be ignored.

Jesus Is Honored (Matthew 26:6-13)

In several places in his Passion narrative, Matthew indicates that the people wanted Jesus to take political control of the nation and lead a rebellion against the Romans. This is rather obvious by their actions as Jesus rode a donkey into the city and a large crowd "spread their clothes on the road and "cut palm branches off the trees and spread them on the road." At the same time, they shouted, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest! Matthew 21:8-9).

The account of the woman who poured perfume on Jesus' head is also found in the Gospels of Mark and John (Mark 14:3-9; John 12: 1-8). Luke's Gospel also has a similar story that some believe may have originally been the same occasion, but several details are different, perhaps changed with years of telling (Luke 7:37).

At any rate, John identifies the woman as Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus, and this event took place six days before Passover, not the two days recorded in Matthew. John also adds that Mary, Martha and Lazarus' sister, anointed Jesus' feet, not his head.

The designation "Simon the Leper" is not to be taken that this man still has leprosy. Rather, it is likely that he is one of the many lepers already healed (Matthew 8:2,3; 10:8; 11:4,5). Otherwise unhealed or unclean lepers were required to live away from the common population. And here was Simon the Leper hosting a feast with Jesus, Mary, Martha, Lazarus and others.

We are told that during the meal Mary approaches Jesus carrying an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume, "which she poured on his head as he was reclining at the table." The perfume Mary uses is pure nard (Mark 14:3; John 12:3), an oil extracted from the root of the nard plant grown in India. This is not a typical household oil for anointing, but an expensive perfume oil used for a solemn and special act of devotion. And by breaking the flask, Mary demonstrates that she is not just pouring a few drops to enhance the aroma of the feast but is performing the highest act of consecration to Jesus, even anointing his feet (John 12:3).

Verse 8, our text says, "When the disciples saw this, they were indignant. 'Why this waste?' they asked." John's account tells us that it is Judas Iscariot who is the most vocal in objecting. He even provides an estimate of the perfume's value: "worth a year's wages" (300 hundred denarii, or top dollar). This perfume or ointment could have been sold and all that money given to the poor. What a waste! That was the criticism of Mary!

And right here we see the rule! According to the "World Book Dictionary," "a rule is a statement of what to do and not to do. A rule is a principle governing conduct or action." The rule is that people of faith are to help command you to be open-handed toward your brothers and toward the poor and

needy in your land (Deuteronomy 15:11). And Jesus added, “I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me (Matthew 25:40). There is no teaching of Jesus more consistently proclaimed than that we care for the poor.

But even though Mary fully understood the rule, nevertheless, she suspended it! Hadn't she previously listened to Jesus? Of course she understood the rule. But before her, this very minute, sits someone she dearly loves who was in terrible need. So Mary suspended the rule. She leaves the table and momentarily returns with a costly perfume, the most valuable possession she has, and pours it over Jesus' head.

In reality, that's the way love is, and love is not the same in every situation. Love does extravagant things.

I read about a well-known author who sent a struggling young author a scarf and a bottle of perfume. The note she sent along said, “I thought you needed a little bit of spoiling.”

Now, Jesus understood what Judas and the other disciples did not. Jesus realized that something was about to happen that would never be repeated. Some things have to be done when the opportunity arises or they will never be accomplished. Jesus knows that the poor would always be a reality and that they could always have the opportunity to help. And they always should help. But Jesus knew he was about to die, and there was only this one chance to anoint his body (prepare his body for burial).

The truth is, many people have misinterpreted Jesus' words in verse 11 as an excuse not to help the poor. This is not what Jesus meant at all. As pointed out previously, not to help the poor conflicts with so many of Jesus' teachings and examples. In this case, Jesus meant that the disciples would have the rest of their lives to help the poor. That is the rule of faithful people. “But you will not always have me,” he said.

In verse 13, Jesus states, “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.” Regardless of what Mary may or may not have understood about Jesus' impending burial, she cannot foresee what Jesus now says about her action. Her demonstration of her devotion to Jesus, though scorned by most who witness it, will be cited as exemplary and praiseworthy.

To me, this story of Mary's extravagant love makes three things clear:

LOVE LISTENS!

LOVE LIBERATES!

LOVE LINGERS!

It's true isn't it? A lovely deed on life does, in fact, become the possession of the whole world. It adds to the beauty of life itself.

In conclusion, someone said of Mother Teresa, “She gave herself to Christ and through Him to her neighbor. This was the end of her biography and the beginning of her life.” Love lingers!

Action Plan

1. What did Jesus mean when he said, “you always have the poor with you?”
2. What does today’s scripture lesson mean for us? How do we apply it to our own lives?
3. How do we encourage one another to worship and serve? We note the example of Jesus encouraging Mary when she was criticized.
4. What are some extravagant gifts that we can demonstrate our love for Jesus openly?

Resources for this lesson:

“2018-2019 Standard Lesson NIV Commentary,” Uniform Series “International Bible Lessons for Christian Teaching,” pages 281-288

“The NIV Application Commentary, Matthew” by Michael J. Wilkins, pages 823-830

“Adult Bible Studies, Spring 2019, Discipleship and Mission, Teachers, Uniform Series,” by Gary Thompson, pages 59-66

“The Gospel of Matthew” by William Barclay, pages 361-366

Dr. Hal Brady is a retired pastor who continues to present the Good News of Jesus Christ and offer encouragement in a fresh and vital way through Hal Brady Ministries (halbradyministries.com).