

Jesus' Final Week

Wednesday: Two Paths Diverge

Mark 14:1-11

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When Pastor Layne asked me in January if I would preach today so he can enjoy one of his favorite times of year—March Madness—I, of course, said yes, because I knew we would be in the season of Lent. I love this time of year in the church calendar, because it is a time when the whole church is on the losing team. A time as Kate Bowler, a professor at Duke University, says, “when we get a minute to tell the truth: Life is so beautiful, and life is so hard. For everyone.”

Easter is coming, yes, but for now, we sit in the ashes of our broken dreams and broken hearts, knowing that God sits here with us.

God sits here with us.

If you are just joining us for the first time in our series, “Jesus’ Last Week,” we are glad you are here. Let me give a quick recap. A few weeks ago, we heard about Sunday. We heard about Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem not as the victorious, conquering King that His followers expected but as this suffering servant—the lamb of God. Monday, we saw Jesus confronting the temple authorities, and last week, we heard how those same temple authorities confronted Him, trying to trap Jesus.

Today we get to hear about Wednesday!

Maybe you have heard Wednesday also called “Hump Day,” because it is the day right in the middle of the work week. I apologize if you now have the Geico commercial from almost ten years ago (yes, I feel old too) stuck in your head, where they talk about how happy people are when switching to Geico and the musicians say, “Happier than a camel on Wednesday.”

There is something about getting past Wednesday in the week, isn’t there?! It is almost like we can taste the weekend. We might say to ourselves, “OK, the hardest part of the week is over. We are on the downward slope now.”

I wish for Jesus He could’ve said the same thing, but He couldn’t. You see, from Wednesday on, everything points to the cross, to His crucifixion, to His death as a criminal. And He knows it and yet He keeps on walking.

Hollywood’s biggest night of the year was last Sunday: the Oscars. As I read our Wednesday passage of Scripture from Mark 14:1-11 (NIV), I want you to picture these events like scenes in a movie.

Feel free to close your eyes if that helps. Give yourself permission to feel whatever it is you are feeling as I read this passage.

1Now the Passover and the Festival of Unleavened Bread were only two days away, and the chief priests and the teachers of the law were scheming to arrest Jesus secretly and kill him. 2“But not during the festival,” they said, “or the people may riot.”

3While he was in Bethany, reclining at the table in the home of Simon the Leper, a woman came with an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume, made of pure nard. She broke the jar and poured the perfume on his head.

4Some of those present were saying indignantly to one another, “Why this waste of perfume? 5It could have been sold for more than a year’s wages and the money given to the poor.” And they rebuked her harshly.

6 “Leave her alone,” said Jesus. “Why are you bothering her? She has done a beautiful thing to me. 7The poor you will always have with you, and you can help them any time you want. But you will not always have me. 8She did what she could. She poured perfume on my body beforehand to prepare for my burial. 9Truly I tell you, wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her.”

10Then Judas Iscariot, one of the Twelve, went to the chief priests to betray Jesus to them. 11They were delighted to hear this and promised to give him money. So he watched for an opportunity to hand him over.

Did you catch the three scenes in this passage? The first was the religious leaders, the second was the unnamed woman, and the third was the betrayer, Judas Iscariot. You also might have picked up on another theme.

Jason Porterfield, in his book, “Fight Like Jesus,” describes this point in Holy Week, describes Wednesday as “reaching a fork in the road.” He goes on to say, “Two paths diverge—one moves toward Jesus, the other away from Him.”

We have reached a fork in the road. Some are moving towards Jesus. Others are moving away from Him. And yet for Jesus, each path leads to the cross.

Let’s focus on Scene 1 first and one path, a path that leads away from Jesus. Mark tells us that representatives from each of the three groups making up the Sanhedrin were in attendance. The

Sanhedrin was the ruling council of the Jews, comprising 70 members plus the high priest, who at the time was Joseph Caiaphas.

“Contrary to what you might expect, Rome actually oversaw the appointment and removal of those on the council. As New Testament scholar Craig Keener points out, “by filling the council with members it desired, Rome, was also able to obtain the results it desired. Chief among those results were the collection of taxes and the maintaining of public order.” (Jason Porterfield, “Fight Like Jesus”)

You may know this scene well—the Sanhedrin plotted Jesus’ death. What gets less attention, though, is what motivated the council to take such a drastic step? Maybe you have heard, as Porterfield lays out, “they were jealous of Jesus’ popularity, angered by His having challenged their authority, and infuriated that He would call out their hypocrisy in front of the crowds. Their fragile egos could not handle such criticism, so they vowed to kill Jesus.”

However, the Gospels paint the Sanhedrin’s motive as far less sinister and far more pragmatic. John 11:47-48 (NIV) tells us that at the meeting some of the members remarked, “Here is this man performing many signs. ⁴⁸ If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and then the Romans will come and take away both our temple and our nation.”

The Sanhedrin saw Jesus as a threat to regional stability.

And if we are honest, their fear was not entirely unwarranted. After all, over the past three days, Jesus had riled up the crowds, disrupted the temple’s profit-making schemes, and publicly undermined their leadership. The situation, in the minds of the Sanhedrin, was spiraling out of control.

If something wasn’t done to stop Jesus, Rome might intervene, the temple—the very center of Jewish life—could be taken away and their nation destroyed.

John continues to flesh out more of the story in John 11:49-50 (NIV):

“Then one of them, named Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, spoke up, “You know nothing at all! ⁵⁰ You do not realize that it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish.”

Caiaphas the high priest, basically takes charge of the meeting and makes a quick political calculation: One man < an entire nation.

Porterfield shares, “When we vilify the Sanhedrin and claim they killed Jesus out of spite, we conveniently overlook how we are just like them.” Caiaphas didn’t say killing Jesus was a good thing. He simply concluded that it was better than the alternative.

If a choice must be made between the destruction of an entire nation and the death of one man, the latter was clearly the lesser of two evils. An unfortunate evil, perhaps, but a necessary one. His argument was a classic case of using the ends to justify the means.

What would you have done if you were one of the Sanhedrin meeting on that fateful Wednesday? Would you have defended Jesus, or would you have joined your colleagues in calling for His death?

Hindsight is always 20/20, so we have the privilege of being able to see how Caiaphas’ equation of “one man is less than an entire nation” contains a fundamental flaw. For inherent to the claim that the ends justify the means is the mistaken belief that we can accurately predict what the end result of our means will be. The truth is Caiaphas could not foresee the future any better than we can.

Let’s continue down this path of moving away from Jesus with Scene 3, Judas the betrayer. Mark tells us that as soon as Judas witnesses the encounter Jesus had with the unnamed woman, he leaves to betray Jesus.

The Gospels never give us a direct answer as to why Judas turned on Jesus. As we see here in Mark as well as in Matthew, they are completely silent on it. Luke 22:3 tells us that Satan entered him, and John comments that Judas being a thief must mean that he did it for greed.

In his book, Porterfield challenges the greed answer by saying that Judas chose to betray Jesus before any offer of money was made. And secondly, if Judas was motivated by money, it’s hard to fathom why he accepted the religious leaders’ opening offer. This was a culture in which haggling was the norm.

Porterfield and N.T. Wright both conclude then that Judas betrayed Jesus because he himself felt betrayed. Over the course of the last few days, Jesus was not the kind of Messiah he had signed up to follow.

It’s fair to assume that after Sunday—after the great entry into the city with the crowds cheering, hailing Jesus as a liberator, and waving branches—that Judas expected a holy war was about to occur for the freedom of Israel.

But then Monday came, and Judas stood aghast as Jesus drove some of his fellow countrymen out of the temple instead of the Gentiles. Then Tuesday came, and Judas listened, I am sure, in horror as Jesus ordered His followers to not fight. And finally on Wednesday, this day, Judas could hardly believe what he was hearing when not once, but twice, Jesus spoke of His imminent death.

If Jesus wanted to die without ever putting up a fight, Judas had no desire to go down in defeat with Him. Judas wanted a messiah who would bring down the hammer on their enemies. It was now abundantly clear that Jesus would never be that kind of messiah. Jesus had betrayed Judas's expectations, so now Judas would betray him.

Sandwiched between these two scenes of darkness—of plotting, of betrayal—is a stunningly, beautiful account of an unnamed woman. This unnamed woman breaks into the company of men and pours precious perfume over Jesus' head. She breaks a costly jar containing pure nard, and then even more costly perfume streams out.

An act of pure devotion, of adoration, of love.

This scene begins by saying "a woman came." She entered. It's a simple yet important phrase, because according to Jewish law, she should not have been present. A woman would not have been invited to such an intimate gathering.

We witness her being marginalized in multiple ways. No one asked for her name. No one offered her a seat at the table. And her hesitancy to speak in the presence of men is clear. The oppression of women in that time was real, very real.

And yet here we are 2,000-plus years later talking about a woman who, as Jesus said, "has done a beautiful thing for me." Here is Jesus, just a few days before His death, elevating women like He always did. Jesus spent His days standing in solidarity with the marginalized. It was the norm. It was standard practice, and on this Wednesday, He is doing it again. It's beautiful. It's powerful.

Nard was an expensive perfume made from a root found only in the Himalayan mountains. Sealed in a semitransparent, marble-like flask, the substance was likely a family heirloom meant to be left unused so that it could be sold as a last resort to avoid financial ruin. This woman was about to use up all her social security, all her rainy-day fund, for an act of pure devotion, an act of pure love.

The sound of cracking alabaster caught everyone's attention. Conversations ceased. Silence filled the room. And the eyes of at least 14 men locked on to this unnamed, uninvited woman.

Without uttering a word, perhaps because of having been silenced all her life, the woman raised the flask over Jesus' head, turned it upside down, and watched as an amber-colored liquid gurgled from the container.

Simon and his guests stared in stunned disbelief, and as the last drops of nard dripped from the flask, the first cries of outrage filled the room. This was no mere slap-on-the-wrist reprimand. Mark describes the complainers as indignant and states they harshly rebuked her. Both verbs in the original Greek carry strong connotations. In fact, the latter word, literally means to snort in anger like a horse.

Why did they feel the need to confront her? Mark tells us they were worried about the poor. Jesus, remember, just the day before reminded them to love their neighbors as themselves. This, in their eyes, was a waste.

And yet again the disciples didn't understand.

Jesus promptly defended the woman, "leave her alone." Their harsh treatment of the woman would not be tolerated. Nor was the interpretation of her actions correct. Far from the woman's act being a scandalous waste, Jesus described it as "a beautiful thing," a preparing for burial.

For rabbis, preparing a body for burial took priority over giving to the poor, since the latter could be done anytime while caring for the dead demanded one's attention right away.

It's clear this woman considered Jesus to be the long-awaited Messiah, the true king of Israel. And she did this despite knowing He would soon suffer and die.

This is exactly why Jesus then says that she will never be forgotten. She is to be remembered, for she was the first to understand and accept what Jesus had been saying all along. This nameless woman was the first to understand what awaited Jesus and still support Him on His path. She knows that He is destined to die and seizes this last opportunity to express her love. In fact, this is the only expression of love Jesus will receive during this last week.

It's beautiful. It's powerful.

Remember what Porterfield said: "Two paths diverge—one moves toward Jesus, the other away from Him." It's truly the journey of Lent. "Life is so beautiful. Life is so hard. For everyone." Jesus truly gets that. In the midst of plotting and betrayal, He experiences an act of true devotion, of adoration.

This is Wednesday. It allows us as readers to take a pause and choose how we will respond. Remembering that each path ultimately leads to the unconditional love of Jesus.

The question is how do you want to get there? How do you want to get to the cross? Which path will you choose? Will you choose the one that moves you toward Jesus or the one that moves away from Him?

It's easy to say, "Well, the one that moves toward Jesus. I want to be like the unnamed woman who gave everything she had." But friends, if we were really to take an honest look, we sometimes are like the Sanhedrin, where we accept, "Well, the end justifies the means, so it's OK." Or we feel betrayed by Jesus like Judas. Jesus has let us down. Life is just too much, and we wonder why He isn't doing something about it. We feel betrayed.

If we take a real honest look, we may be on the path that leads us away from Jesus.

But friends, the good news is that there is love, there is Jesus on each path. It's simply who He is. It's hard for us to fathom, but Jesus loved Judas, He loved the Sanhedrin, and He died for them just as much as the unnamed woman with the alabaster jar. Each path ends with the cross, ends with love if we so choose.

Growing up in my home church, every Good Friday we would sing the hymn "Were You There." "Were you there," asks the old song, "when they crucified my Lord?" Yes, it's a beautiful song.

And in the context of Wednesday the better question might just be what was going on inside of you? What was going on inside of you when they crucified my Lord? Were you glad to get rid of such a troublemaker to protect and maintain the stability of a region like the Sanhedrin? Like Judas, were you willing to toss aside those who fail to meet your expectations? One betrayal for another. Or were you ready to give everything you had to honor and love this unexpected Messiah?