

During my college years I worked summers and holidays as a biologist in the Bird and Mammal Lab, at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington DC. I remember a story about a research biologist banned for life, who would never be allowed to do any research there, ever again. One of the curators noticed the drawers of bone & skull specimens seemed less full after he did measurements for his research ... but it was unthinkable that specimens would be missing or have disappeared from the collection. So the next time that professor came to do research, the suspicious curator kept a discreet eye on him. And sure enough, when that fellow thought no one was watching, he dropped one of the animal skulls onto the floor, stomped and crushed it, then brushed away the fragments. The incensed Smithsonian staffer rushed over to confront him and found a stack of specimen tags tucked away in his briefcase, from skulls and long bones that he'd already destroyed. Busted, the professor confessed that he was trying to prove a hypothesis for an article, and was getting rid of any specimen samples that seemed to contradict his theory... **sort of adjusting the evidence and data to support what he had already decided was true.**

In all four Gospels, the religious leaders oppose Jesus because they are sure and knew that he had to be a fraud, a blasphemer and certainly not someone sent by God. But having raised Lazarus to life after four days dead in the tomb, **you would think that would be sufficiently credible and convincing enough evidence that Jesus probably did have something special going on with God... since he really had raised a dead man back to life.** In John's telling of the story, the chief priests were not denying that it happened, **yet that did nothing to dissuade their opposition to Jesus.** In fact, it made them all the more determined to plot against him. Better to kill Jesus and Lazarus than to grapple with the possibility that you might be wrong, or that Jesus might be as he claimed to be, the Son of God.

vs. 47-48, 53

So the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the council, and said, 'What are we to do? This man is performing many signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, ... So from that day on they planned to put him to death.

They recognized that Jesus had power to do miraculous things, but only saw it as a threat to their power and authority to rule. The religious leaders had already made up their minds, **so ...** regardless of any evidence or miraculous signs that Jesus did, **they were never going to accept it, even if it meant trying to destroy evidence. Or how about Judas, who had every possible spiritual advantage.** He was one of the twelve named disciples chosen by Jesus, and for three years Judas had traveled with him. He had seen and experienced Jesus do amazing signs of wonder: sight to the blind, hearing to the deaf, the lame leaping, the storm at sea calmed, lepers cured of their disease, and now even a dead man brought back to life. **So it certainly wasn't for lack of evidence that Judas was apparently impervious to the ministry of Jesus, and that Judas still turned on Jesus to betray him.** So how could Judas be exposed to Jesus every day, for all that time, hearing the incredible things Jesus said, seeing the amazing things Jesus accomplished, **and in the end how could he, still betray him?** Like the researcher banned from the Smithsonian, and the deadly opposition coming from the chief priests, **Judas had an agenda that mattered more to him than the truth, or the evidence concerning Jesus.** What motivated Judas has long fueled speculation and conjecture, and imaginative attempts to explain his reasons for betrayal. And in many choral pieces and various drama and stage productions, the part of Judas is often the most interesting, the most complex and well-developed character.

Theologians and artists love to speculate about Judas, and suggest justifiable motivations for his betrayal of Jesus. Some have suggested that he became disenchanted with Jesus, or that Judas expected Jesus to overthrow Roman tyranny, and that perhaps by having Jesus arrested, he hoped to force Jesus into a rebellion against Rome. Some have purposed that Judas was tricked by the religious leaders. Though many have speculated & suggested fascinating explanations, the Bible is quite clear and explicit that Judas was not a victim or pawn of circumstances, or forced, but that he is responsible for making his own choice to betray his Lord **primarily for the money.**

Matthew 26:14-16

Then one of the twelve, who was called Judas Iscariot, went to the chief priests and said, "What will you give me if I betray him to you?" They paid him thirty pieces of silver. And from that moment he began to look for an opportunity to betray him.

Judas was negotiating a deal, making a business arrangement – trying to get the best price that he could manage, -and so for 30 pieces of silver **he sold his relationship with Jesus**. Now intellectually it's probably more complicated and subtle, and to say it was for the money doesn't feel very satisfying. But consider the influence of a person's drive for more money, and how it can lead to conflict, struggle and corruption; such as the impact of money on our political system as politicians make deals for campaign contributions. Or consider how once close and caring family members, will get shredded in battles over disputed inheritances. Or as if a divorce weren't agonizing and brutal enough, the bloodbath of bitterness and greed when dividing the assets.

Greed and the love of money can bring out the very worst in people, just as it brought out the worst in Judas, to betray his Lord. And now **in contrast** to Judas betraying Jesus for the money, consider the extreme extravagance of what Mary gave Jesus,

vs. 3-6

Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" (He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief.)

To Mary, her finest and her best went to express her love and devotion, and such extravagance was an appropriate and appreciated gift for her Lord. To Judas, such an outpouring of love was a foolish waste, and he was appalled at the cost, Jesus wasn't worth that to him. **Mary and Judas could not have seen that same costly nard more differently.** To one, it was a way to touch and express her love for God, and for the other, his cold and hard attitude led to a rebuke from Jesus... **and it's the attitude, the heart that made all the difference.** It is clear that the death of Lazarus left Martha and Mary devastated, crushed and heartbroken. We can well imagine their extreme gratitude, their unrestrained joy when Jesus raised Lazarus from death, and so they held a festive dinner party to celebrate.

To Martha and Mary, raising their brother from the grave was clear evidence of the power and graciousness of God, and no extravagance or cost was too much or over the top. In the midst of ugly scheming and secret plots of evil, Mary's anointing of Jesus is a meaningful and passionate gesture of gratitude, and deep love for bringing her brother back to life. But Judas was so caught up in his own agenda of theft and greed, so busy noticing the negative that he could not see the grace. **Judas missed entirely the point of Mary's sacrificial act, because a critical heart is not a grateful & loving heart.** There is a sharp contrast being made here between Judas and Mary. Judas knew well the exact price, the cost at 300 denarii. But Mary knew the true value, she knew what it was worth, a mere trifle compared to God's love and sacrifice for us. As John tells the story, there is **an ironic twist and contrast** in that both Mary and Judas were preparing Jesus for burial, Judas by betraying him, and Mary by anointing his body.

In his hypocrisy, Judas claims that it's a matter of principle, that the perfume should be sold and the money to feed the poor. But for Mary it wasn't about principle, **it was all about passion.** It was entirely driven by her love for this person, Jesus... **and that I believe is the point of this passage.** By and large, we tend to operate and be guided by principle. We do the right thing, well, because it is right. We are faithful and religious, because we should be. We obey the rules and commandments, because the Bible says so. * **But we mustn't let our sense of what's proper and fitting, keep us from doing that which is more**

generous and loving. It's not that there is anything wrong with following principle, it's just that there's so much more, better and deeper than that. **Mary takes it to that deeper level.** She isn't committed and devoted to just the principle, she is committed and devoted to the person, her Lord Jesus Christ. Mary is motivated by her all-encompassing love for her Lord... and so she is free to feel and to waste the costly perfume, and she fills the whole house with its aromatic fragrance. The story as we read it in John was written many decades later as a very old and faithful disciple named John remembers it... **and what is picture that he paints for us?** ¹The plotting chief priests intent on destroying the evidence, ²the hypocrisy and bitter greed of Judas in betrayal, ³the humility, love and extravagance of Mary's faith as perhaps the scent of nard still fills his senses. And as he travels back in his mind, reflecting on that event, he recalls that moment of Mary's unrestrained extravagance and total joy, as **a prophetic act of love before the coming horror. Mary symbolizes heartfelt and absolute devotion to Jesus. A devotion that breaks open that which is most precious and freely pours it out at the feet of the Savior.** ¹Why did Mary give such a precious offering to her Lord? ²Why did Judas surrender to greed and betray his Lord? ³Why did the chief priests plot and want to kill the Lord? **For all of them, their actions reveal what they valued most ... and so for me I ask, what do I value most, which one am I?** And perhaps the most important task & the gift of this season of Lent is for us to refresh and renew the passion of our walk with God. It's a time to rekindle our passion, our hunger for the Lord, deepen our love for Jesus, and not just learn more theology, seek to know Jesus more deeply, and not just more religion. **So what difference does it make when we recognize God's grace?**, how should we respond to the grace of God in Jesus Christ?, and how do we respond with extravagant gratitude and love?

In Matthew, 13:44-46 Jesus paints a pair of word pictures of how the evidence of God's love can change the way we live:

'The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then **in his joy** he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. 'Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and **sold all that he had** and bought it

There is so much more to the Christian life than just trying to behave and live right. **God loves us, and want us to know him, for then we can truly love the Lord with all our heart, from which extravagant gratitude and love will surely flow.**