

**Weekly Bible Study Series, Vol. 11, No. 4: 7 February 2010**

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**IT'S A THIN LINE BETWEEN ZEAL AND GREED!**

**This week's Text: Matthew 26: 1- 16**

**Extracts:**

**And when Jesus was in Bethany at the house of Simon the leper, a woman came to Him having an alabaster flask of very costly fragrant oil, and she poured it on His head as He sat at the table. But when His disciples saw it, they were indignant, saying, "Why this waste? For this fragrant oil might have been sold for much and given to the poor" [Matt. 26: 6-9]**

*In the wake of the recent massive 7.0 magnitude earthquake in Haiti, an American religious group drawn from two Baptist Church congregations in the state of Idaho planned a "Haitian Orphan Rescue Mission" to help abandoned children.<sup>1</sup> Their goal was to take Haitian orphans across the border to an orphanage they were planning to build in the Dominican Republic. However, on Sunday, 31 January 2010, ten members of the group were arrested and have since been charged to court for child trafficking for trying to take 33 children (aged 2 months to 12 years) out of Haiti without the required documents. The Baptist missionaries are claiming zeal for God's work as the basis for their action, asserting on their web site, "God has laid it upon our hearts the need to go now versus waiting until the permanent facility is built." On the other hand, the Haitian authorities are alleging greed, given that one of the victims still had parents and children are currently being sold for US\$10, 000 each in the global child trafficking market.*

*Any of us can easily be in the position of those Baptist missionaries. We are desirous to work for God as labourers in His vineyard. We may be aspiring to operate a ministry or to play a significant role in our local churches. In some cases, our ambition could even be detrimental to our comfort or safety, family or friends. But what is really driving us? Is it out of passion for the Lord (zeal) or a burning desire for personal gain (greed)? How can we differentiate one from the other so that we do not get the Lord's rebuke where we expect a pat on the back?*

*In this week's study, a certain woman poured expensive oil on Jesus' body and some of His disciples saw her effort as wasteful. Which party demonstrated zeal for the Lord? Which party showed evidence of greed? Let us find out.*

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<sup>1</sup> Story is based on the following sources: "Baptist group denies trafficking in Haitian kids," *NBC News and News Services*, Mon., Feb. 1, 2010; [www.msnbc.msn.com/id/35162046](http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/35162046) and "Many children in Haiti case are not orphans," *Wed., Feb. 3, 2010, msnbc.com news services*, [www.msnbc.msn.com/id/35221007/us/world\\_news-haiti\\_earthquake/](http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/35221007/us/world_news-haiti_earthquake/)

## 1. Background: A woman anoints the head of Jesus

To fully understand and appreciate this story, you may need to read **Matthew 26: 6-14** in conjunction with **Mark 14: 1-11** and **John 12: 1-8**. Jesus was approaching the end of His earthly ministry, just before His Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem [**Jn 12: 12**]. It was a few days to the Passover and He was in Bethany, a city near Jerusalem where He had raised Lazarus from the dead [**v. 1**]. Jesus had been invited to a dinner there hosted by Simon the leper [**Matt. 26: 6**] who happened to be the father of Judas Iscariot [**Jn 12: 4**]. Lazarus sat on the “high” table beside Jesus [**v. 2**]. The host was referred to as “Simon the leper.” Does that mean that he still had the disease? No, otherwise, according to the Law of Moses, he would have had to be isolated until he was pronounced healed by the priests [see **Lev. 13**]. Scriptures have a way of retaining people’s unsavoury past as if to keep them humble, and to remind them from where they have come to God. For example, Rahab remained the harlot almost wherever she is mentioned [**Josh. 2: 1; 6: 25; Heb. 11: 31**] even though she had long given up the trade, married and become King David’s ancestor [**Matt. 1: 5-6**].

**Matthew’s** Gospel did not mention the name of the woman that came to anoint Jesus but **John** identifies her as Mary, the younger sister of Lazarus and Martha [**Jn 12: 3**]. Our first encounter with her was some years earlier when her elder sister, Martha, welcomed Jesus into their house as He was passing by [**Lk 10: 38-42**]. While Martha “was distracted with much serving,” Mary “*sat at Jesus’ feet and heard His word.*” When Martha asked Jesus to let her sister come to help her with the work, Jesus replied that Mary had chosen “that good part which [would] not be taken away from her.” Mary realized that Jesus, as the Bread of life, had actually come to feed them, not to be fed. Years later, when Jesus came to the tomb of Lazarus who had died four days earlier, it was Mary’s weeping that drew His tears. As she fell at His feet, she cried, “Lord if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” So, “when Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her weeping, He groaned in the spirit and was troubled” and “Jesus wept” [**Jn 11: 32-35**]. Thus, this woman had a close *personal relationship* with the Christ that most of us can never dream of. You can then imagine the amount of zeal that she put into coming forward to anoint her Lord and Saviour. Let us underline the key issues:

### a) *Her motive*

At the dinner, Martha, her elder sister was one of those that served while Lazarus sat at table with Jesus [**Jn 12: 1-2**]. You can imagine how this woman felt about Jesus that day- the Man that had restored joy and life to her family. Everything that Jesus had taught her about life and the hereafter flooded back. She might also have heard (or overheard) the refrain from Christ’s recent speeches where He had said, “You know that after two days is the Passover, and the Son of Man will be delivered up to be crucified” [**Matt. 26: 2**]. The Man who had restored her own brother

back to life was now going to give His own to the whole world. She had to be able to demonstrate to Him her gratitude and appreciation before His crucifixion. She was not going to care what meaning people would read into her action. She loved the Lord and she was going to demonstrate that zeal through her action.

b) *Her action*

She brought “an alabaster flask [box-KJV] of very costly fragrant oil” and “poured it on His head as He sat at the table” [v. 7]. **Mark’s Gospel [Mk 14: 3]** agrees with **Matthew** that the oil was poured on the head of Jesus while **John** says it was His feet which she also wiped with her hair “and the house was filled with the fragrance of the oil” [Jn 12: 3]. There is no contradiction because Jesus Himself said that she poured “this fragrant oil on My body” [Matt. 26: 12]. That suggests that she began from the head and went all the way to His feet until the whole flask became empty and her hair had mopped up the liquid from the body of Jesus. What a remarkable expression of love for the Lord!

c) *Others’ reactions*

The disciples of Jesus were said to be “indignant, saying, ‘Why this waste? For this fragrant oil might have been sold for much and given to the poor’” [vv. 8-9]. In **John’s Gospel**, the statement is attributed to Judas Iscariot, whose father was hosting the dinner [Jn 12: 4]. Up to that time, his integrity was already questionable. His remark was “not that he cared for the poor, but *because he was a thief, and had the money box, and he used to take what was put in it*” [v. 6]. Therefore, Judas Iscariot’s reaction was not borne out of zeal for his Master but out of his greed for pecuniary gain!

Jesus put side by side Mary’s zeal with Judas’ greed in the following words [Matt. 26: 10-13]:

*Why do you trouble the woman? For she has done a good work for Me, for you have the poor with you always, but Me you do not have always; for in pouring this fragrant oil on My body, she did it for My burial. Assuredly, I say to you, wherever this gospel is preached in the whole world, what this woman has done will also be told as a memorial to her*

When your passion for God is directed solely at pleasing and glorifying Him, that is zeal. However, if you are using “zeal” as a cover for your own personal pursuits, you are walking along the highway of greed. That is why the Psalmist (speaking prophetically of Jesus) writes, “[The] zeal for Your house has eaten me up, and the reproaches of those who reproach You have fallen on me” [Ps. 69: 9; Jn 2: 17]. But it is a thin line between zeal and greed; it can be likened to the one

between the neck and the throat! How can we then know that our “fanaticism” is for God and not for our self-aggrandisement? Let us dig more into the matter.

## 2. Measuring your zeal level

Reportedly, the Baptist missionaries on trial in Haiti for child trafficking have of this moment been refused bail and could face imprisonment, if found guilty. Yet, deep down in their hearts, they were trying to help the orphans of the earthquake-devastated island out of their zeal for God’s work. Right now, you may find yourself in a similar situation. For example, you could be a good class teacher trying to pay special attention to some lazy students who then turned around to accuse you of child molestation. You could be the church treasurer holding the day’s church offerings. That night, thieves came and robbed you of the offerings you had planned to take to the bank in the morning. How can you convince your church that you did not steal it or organize others to do so? Therefore, it is a serious matter and it is a thin line between zeal and greed.

You can, however, measure your zeal level which can fall into any of the following categories (among so many others):

### a) *Sheer greed*

There are some people who cannot hide their mercenary intentions in setting up a church or ministry. You can easily see that it is a business enterprise that merely bears the name of a charismatic church. They actually work to attract “like minds,” especially those who can pay fat tithes, mostly from unclean sources. In some other cases, they may covet gifts of the Holy Spirit and it is not surprising to see most of their members parading themselves as gifted in prophecy or speaking in tongues. Deep down, however, such people are just using religion to survive the harsh global economic conditions! That is sheer greed in action.

A good example from the Scriptures was a certain man from the city of Samaria called Simon. He had previously been a sorcerer who had “astonished the people of Samaria, claiming that he was someone great.” The people heeded him because they saw him as “the great power of God.” But when the deacon Philip (who had fled from Saul’s persecution in Jerusalem) came and demonstrated the true power of the Holy Spirit, Simon also believed and he was baptized. He was amazed by the power demonstrated by God through Philip and he also wanted it! So, when Peter came and the former sorcerer saw that by Peter laying hands on people, they could receive the Holy Spirit. he offered money to the apostle, saying, “Give me this power also, that anyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit.” Peter cursed him and told him that the gift of

God could never be purchased with money [Acts 8: 9-20]. That was sheer greed. His zeal was for himself, not for God.

b) *Disguised greed*

Sometimes, the greed may not be obvious but it is there. You may really be doing exploits for God but you are still a human being who is trying to keep pace with the Joneses, that is, other church leaders or members that you are using to benchmark your progress. Therefore, you do certain things not because you need them for your calling but so as to be seen to be among the leading pastors or members in that congregation or body of Christ. See, for example, how church ranks have been bastardized in some congregations. When you hear that somebody that entered the church many years after you has been moved up, you also want it for yourself or that church should face discontent. When another church leader buys a plane, you have to have one even when you may never fly it. Every known name in Christian circles is on cable TV and you have to be there too. On the surface, it masquerades as zeal for the Lord but deep down, it is greed, disguised as zeal! Recently, the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC) in Nigeria had to rule that all religious broadcasts that celebrate the preacher rather than God should be banned from airing.<sup>2</sup>

See what the sons of Zebedee, John and James, tried to do against the rest of the disciples. They came to Jesus and asked Him to let them sit on His right and left in His kingdom [Matt. 20: 20-21]. Was that zeal or greed? It was certainly greed because when the other ten apostles heard of it, “they were greatly displeased with the two brothers.” To calm them down, Jesus warned, “It shall not be so among you, but *whoever desires to be great among you, let him be your servant*’ [vv. 24-26].

c) *Misguided zeal*

Sometimes, our zeal for God is quite genuine but we go about it the wrong way. For example, Saul (later known as Paul) was so sure that by getting rid of the early Christians, he was doing God’s work. When Stephen was martyred by stoning, the clothes of those who did it were laid at the feet of Saul [Acts 7: 58] and he was consenting to Stephen’s death [Acts 8: 1]. He was “still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord” when Jesus struck him blind on the way to Damascus, leading to his conversion as Paul the apostle of the Gentiles [Acts 9: 1-16]. Writing later about his misguided zeal, Paul said, “I thank Christ Jesus our Lord who has enabled me because He counted me faithful, putting me into the ministry; although I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and an

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<sup>2</sup>“NBC reads riot act to broadcast stations,” Thurs., 4 Feb. 2010; [www.ngrguardiannews.com/breaking\\_news/articles](http://www.ngrguardiannews.com/breaking_news/articles)

insolent man, but I obtained mercy *because I did it ignorantly in unbelief*  
**[1 Tim. 1: 12-13]**

Another interesting example is Apollos who “being fervent in spirit” spoke and taught things about Jesus in Ephesus “though he knew only the baptism of John.” Aquila and Priscilla, church leaders there, “took him aside and explained to him the way of God *more accurately*.” So when he then crossed to Achaia, “he *vigorously refuted* the Jews publicly, *showing that Jesus is the Christ*” **[Acts 18: 24-28]**. He had been cured of misguided zeal!

d) *True zeal*

When your motive is to please and glorify God and you do it according to His word, then your zeal is true and powerful. In that case, your *intensity matches* your *integrity* and God will boast of you in such glowing terms as the man after His heart (David) **[ 1 Sam. 16: 7]**, or His friend (Abraham) **[Is. 41: 8]** or His beloved Son in whom He is well pleased (Jesus) **[Matt. 3: 17]**.

From the forgoing analysis, we can easily see that *Mary exhibited true zeal* when she anointed the body of Jesus with expensive fragrant oil and wiped it with her hair. In appreciation, Jesus commended her and made her name and zeal a memorial to be acknowledged worldwide anytime that gospel was preached. *Judas Iscariot*, on the other hand, *exhibited sheer greed*. He was more interested in the goodies that went with Christ’s ministry. It is instructive that soon after that dinner, Judas went to consult with the chief priests, saying, “What are you willing to pay me if I deliver Him to you?” They counted out to him thirty pieces of silver **[Matt. 26: 14-15]**. That is sheer greed at work.

### **3. Conclusion: Burn with zeal not with greed!**

The word of God says, “Lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in and steal; *for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also*” **[Matt. 6: 20-21]**. Zeal points you up to heavenly treasures while greed drags you down to earthly pleasures. Why can’t you say like the prophet Elijah, “I have been very zealous for the Lord of hosts” **[1 Kgs 19: 14]**?

It is better to burn with missionary zeal than to be consumed by mercenary greed!