

Homiletics Analysis: Matthew 26

Content & Intent

This Text — Content

Matthew 26 is the longest chapter in the Gospel of Matthew and functions as the hinge point of the entire narrative — the passage from ministry to passion. It opens with Jesus' fourth explicit passion prediction (v. 2), setting the theological tone: everything that follows is not accident but appointment. The chapter then moves through six major sequences: the conspiracy and anointing (vv. 1–16), the Last Supper and institution of the New Covenant (vv. 17–30), the Gethsemane vigil and prayer (vv. 31–46), the arrest (vv. 47–56), the Sanhedrin trial (vv. 57–68), and Peter's denial (vv. 69–75). The chapter closes not with Jesus but with Peter weeping bitterly — a deliberate structural choice that leaves the reader suspended between guilt and the need for grace.

The chapter's internal architecture is built around a stark contrast: Jesus moves with sovereign clarity, full knowledge, and settled obedience toward the cross, while everyone around him — the religious leaders, Judas, the disciples, Peter — moves through confusion, self-preservation, misplaced confidence, and ultimately betrayal and abandonment. The woman with the alabaster flask stands as the sole exception: she alone acts in a manner Jesus pronounces worthy of permanent memorial (v. 13).

This Text — Intent

God's intent through Matthew 26 is to expose the depth of human failure and the unshakeable sovereignty of divine purpose — and to do so in a way that makes the cross not a tragedy to be explained but a mission to be received. The reader is meant to see themselves in the disciples — overconfident (v. 35), asleep in the hour of need (v. 40), fleeing when the cost becomes real (v. 56) — and to see in Jesus the one who went forward anyway, cup and all. The chapter is not primarily about moral failure; it is about the God who accomplished redemption through, around, and despite every form of human failure. The intent is not guilt but awe — the awe that produces repentance, trust, and worship at the feet of the one who went where no one else could or would go.

Subject Sentence: Jesus moves with sovereign resolve into betrayal, trial, and abandonment to accomplish what only He could.

Primary Claim: God is demonstrating through Matthew 26 that the cross was not a catastrophe that overtook Jesus but a cup He deliberately took — and He is calling every

reader who sees their own face in the disciples to cast themselves on the one who went forward alone.

Interpretive Evaluation

The Gethsemane Prayer and the Nature of Jesus' Struggle (vv. 36–46)

The most significant interpretive controversy in this chapter surrounds the Gethsemane prayer: “My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will” (v. 39). Liberal scholarship has sometimes read this as evidence of Jesus’ surprise or unpreparedness — a man confronting death and wavering. This reading fails on the chapter’s own terms: Jesus has predicted his death four times and has just spoken of it over the supper table. He is not surprised. A second error, found in some devotional preaching, psychologizes the prayer as primarily about fear of physical death. The text does not support this — a courageous man could face crucifixion without this level of anguish. The Reformed reading, following the exegetical tradition of Calvin, Murray, and Carson, is that the cup is the cup of divine wrath (cf. Isaiah 51:17, 22; Jeremiah 25:15; Revelation 14:10) — the full weight of God’s judgment against sin that Jesus was about to drink on behalf of His people. The struggle in Gethsemane is not Jesus wavering on whether to obey; it is the eternal Son of God, fully human, experiencing the crushing weight of what obedience to the Father’s saving purpose would require. The Lutheran tradition reaches a largely similar conclusion here, and there is no meaningful refutation needed. The Wesleyan tradition sometimes reads the prayer as emphasizing Jesus’ exemplary submission as a model for human prayer — there is something to retain in this (the prayer *is* a model), but it must not displace the substitutionary weight of the cup as the primary content.

The Institution of the Lord’s Supper (vv. 26–29)

“This is my body... this is my blood” (vv. 26–28) has generated the most sustained theological controversy in the history of Christian hermeneutics. The Roman Catholic reading (transubstantiation) holds that the bread and wine become the actual body and blood of Christ through consecration — the copula “is” taken with full ontological literalism. The Lutheran reading (consubstantiation / sacramental union) holds that Christ’s body and blood are truly present *in, with, and under* the elements. The Reformed reading, following Zwingli’s symbolic insistence and Calvin’s spiritual presence refinement, holds that the elements are signs that truly signify and seal — Christ is genuinely present to faith in the Supper, but the “is” functions as the “is” of representation (cf. “I am the door,” “the rock was Christ,” “the field is the world”). Several textual factors support the Reformed reading: (1) Jesus was physically present with the disciples when he said “this is my body,” making a literal identification impossible; (2) the cup is explicitly identified as a covenant ratification (“the blood of the covenant,” v. 28, echoing Exodus 24:8), suggesting a memorial-and-pledge function rather than a eucharistic repetition of sacrifice; (3) the eschatological orientation of verse 29 (“until that day when I drink it new with you in my

Father's kingdom") frames the Supper as a forward-looking pledge, not a backward-looking re-presentation. The Lutheran contribution worth retaining is its insistence that the Supper is more than bare memorial — something is genuinely communicated and sealed; Calvin's spiritual presence formulation honors this. The Catholic reading requires importing a philosophical framework (Aristotelian substance/accidents) that the text neither requires nor supports, and it renders the "until I drink it new" forward-looking orientation structurally incoherent.

Judas and Predestination (vv. 14–16, 20–25, 47–50)

The betrayal of Judas raises the question of divine sovereignty and human culpability. Arminian readings tend to emphasize that Judas made a genuine free choice and bear full responsibility; the foreknowledge did not determine the outcome. Reformed readings affirm both that Judas acted freely according to his own desires and that his betrayal was entirely within the counsel of God's sovereign purpose (v. 24: "as it is written of him"). The Reformed reading does not resolve the tension philosophically but insists the text holds both simultaneously without embarrassment. The warning of verse 24 ("woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed") functions as genuine moral assessment of a genuine moral act — the sovereignty of God does not dissolve Judas's culpability. This is not a pitfall to exploit homiletically but a feature to acknowledge honestly: the text does not present Judas as a puppet, nor as someone outside God's purposes.

Peter's Denial and Apostasy/Perseverance (vv. 31–35, 69–75)

Some Arminian interpreters have used the disciples' failure — especially Peter's explicit denial — to argue against the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints. The text does not support this use. Peter's failure is presented as exactly what Jesus predicted (v. 34), and the narrative is clearly designed to frame restoration (anticipated in 28:7, 10, 16–20; explicitly in John 21). The Reformed reading holds that Peter's denial is a severe sin, not an apostasy — Jesus prays for him (Luke 22:32), and his weeping (v. 75) marks genuine repentance, not final abandonment. The perseverance of the saints is not the claim that believers do not fall grievously; it is that they do not fall finally.

Key Canonical Support

- **Isaiah 53:3–12** — The Servant who was "despised and rejected," who bore our griefs and carried our sorrows, who was led like a lamb to slaughter — the chapter Matthew 26 is enacting. The silence of Jesus before his accusers (v. 63) echoes Isaiah 53:7 with striking precision.
- **Exodus 24:6–8** — Moses seals the Sinai covenant with sacrificial blood: "Behold the blood of the covenant." Jesus' institution of the Supper ("my blood of the covenant," v. 28) deliberately invokes this scene — but announces a new and better covenant sealed by a better and final sacrifice.

- **Jeremiah 31:31–34** — The New Covenant promise: “I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.” Matthew 26:28 (“poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins”) is the fulfillment announcement. The supper table is where Jeremiah’s promise gets a cup attached to it.
- **Psalms 22:1–21** — The psalm of God-forsakenness and ultimate vindication that underlies the passion narrative. Gethsemane’s anguish (vv. 37–38) is not incoherent suffering — it is the fulfillment trajectory of the psalm’s opening cry, which ends in vindication and universal worship.
- **Romans 5:6–10** — “While we were still weak... Christ died for the ungodly.” The disciples’ weakness, sleep, betrayal, and flight in Matthew 26 are not the background against which Jesus’ love is displayed; they *are* the display. Paul’s “while we were still sinners” is Matthew 26 in theological summary.

Aim: To lead the reader to see themselves accurately in the disciples’ failure and to see in Jesus’ sovereign, deliberate advance toward the cross the only ground on which failure can be faced, confessed, and overcome.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
1–2	Jesus announces: Passover is two days away; the Son of Man will be delivered to be crucified	Fourth passion prediction; Jesus frames his death by the calendar of Passover — deliberate typological alignment
3–5	Chief priests and elders gather at Caiaphas’s house; conspire to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him; fear the crowd during the feast	The religious establishment is already committed; their “not during the feast” (v. 5) will be overridden by events — God’s timing, not theirs
6–13	At Bethany, a woman anoints Jesus’ head with expensive alabaster flask; disciples react with indignation at the waste; Jesus defends her: she has done a beautiful thing, preparing him for burial; her act will be told wherever the	Sole act of wholehearted devotion in the chapter; woman unnamed here (cf. John 12:3 — Mary of Bethany); Jesus pronounces permanent memorial — the only act in this chapter Jesus explicitly commends

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	gospel is preached	
14–16	Judas goes to the chief priests; offers to betray Jesus for thirty pieces of silver; begins seeking opportunity	Thirty silver pieces — Zechariah 11:12–13; Matthew will make the connection explicit in ch. 27; Judas is acting freely and within prophetic appointment simultaneously
17–19	Disciples ask where to prepare the Passover; Jesus directs them to a specific man in the city with sovereign foreknowledge	Jesus knows; the preparation is not improvised
20–25	At the table, Jesus announces one of the twelve will betray him; disciples ask “Is it I, Lord?”; Jesus identifies the betrayer by the dipping of bread; warns of woe; Judas asks “Is it I, Rabbi?” — not “Lord” — Jesus confirms	Judas’s address (“Rabbi” not “Lord”) is exegetically significant — a distinction between disciple and follower; the woe is genuine moral judgment on a genuinely culpable act
26–29	Jesus takes bread, blesses, breaks, distributes: “This is my body”; takes the cup: “This is my blood of the covenant, poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins”; announces he will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom	Covenant ratification language; forgiveness of sins explicit; eschatological pledge in v. 29 frames the Supper as forward-looking
30	After singing a hymn, they go to the Mount of Olives	The Hallel (Psalms 113–118) sung at Passover — they depart singing words of praise and trust
31–35	Jesus predicts all will fall away, citing Zechariah 13:7; promises to go before them to Galilee after resurrection; Peter protests vehemently;	Peter’s overconfidence is a mirror for every reader who trusts his own resolve; Jesus’ promise of Galilee anticipates restoration

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	all disciples assert they will never deny him	before the failure even occurs
36–46	Gethsemane: Jesus takes Peter, James, John deeper; tells them his soul is overwhelmed to the point of death; falls on his face and prays three times for the cup to pass if possible — “not as I will, but as you will”; returns three times to find the disciples sleeping; final resolve: “Rise, let us go; see, my betrayer is at hand”	Three-fold prayer matches three-fold sleep and three-fold denial; the cup is the cup of wrath; “not as I will, but as you will” is the supreme expression of the Son’s covenantal obedience
47–56	Judas arrives with crowd armed with swords and clubs; signals Jesus with a kiss; Jesus is seized; a disciple cuts off the ear of the servant; Jesus rebukes the violence, affirms he could call twelve legions of angels, states this must happen to fulfill the Scriptures; all disciples flee	“All this has taken place that the Scriptures of the prophets might be fulfilled” (v. 56) — the governing interpretive key for the entire arrest scene
57–68	Jesus led to Caiaphas; Sanhedrin seeks false testimony; two witnesses cite temple prediction; high priest demands Jesus declare himself; Jesus affirms and applies Daniel 7:13 to himself (“you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power, coming on the clouds of heaven”); condemned for blasphemy; struck and mocked	The trial is a mock trial — false witnesses, leading questions, pre-determined verdict; Jesus’ answer in v. 64 is the calm center of the chapter’s chaos; he is condemned for telling the truth
69–75	Peter, warming himself in the courtyard, is identified three times as a follower of Jesus; denies three times	The three-fold denial completing what the three-fold sleep began; “he went out and wept bitterly” — the

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	with increasing vehemence (“I do not know the man”); the rooster crows; Peter remembers Jesus’ words and weeps bitterly	only response left when resolve has collapsed; chapter ends here, not with Jesus

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	1–16	The Conspiracy, the Anointing, and the Betrayal Arranged
2	17–30	The New Covenant Sealed at the Passover Table
3	31–46	The Cup Accepted: Gethsemane and the Obedience of the Son
4	47–56	The Arrest: Fulfillment, Not Failure
5	57–68	The Trial: Condemned for Telling the Truth
6	69–75	Peter’s Denial and the End of Self-Reliance

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: Jesus moves with sovereign resolve into betrayal, trial, and abandonment to accomplish what only He could.

Primary Claim: God is demonstrating through Matthew 26 that the cross was not a catastrophe that overtook Jesus but a cup He deliberately took — and He is calling every reader who sees their own face in the disciples to cast themselves on the one who went forward alone.

Applications (Five)

1. Reframe what you think happened at the cross. (*Mind/belief*) The disciples interpreted the arrest as the unraveling of everything — “all the disciples left him and fled” (v. 56). Most readers carry a version of this instinct: the cross was a tragedy that Jesus transformed by

resurrection. Matthew 26 will not allow this. Jesus predicts his betrayal, directs the preparations, cites the fulfilling Scriptures in real time, and refuses twelve legions of angels not because he cannot call them but because the Scriptures must be fulfilled. The cross was not something that happened to Jesus; it was something Jesus did. Until this is seated in the mind, the significance of the cup in Gethsemane and the forgiveness announced over the cup at table cannot land with their full weight.

2. Let Gethsemane give you an honest vocabulary for your own dark places.

(Affections/worship) Jesus says, “My soul is very sorrowful, even to death” (v. 38). He falls on his face. He prays three times. He asks for the cup to pass. This is not a performance of anguish — it is the Son of God entering fully into the weight of what redemption cost. For the reader who has been told that faith means composure, or that honest prayer means something has gone wrong spiritually, Gethsemane provides a correction at the level of worship: the Father was not displeased with “if it is possible, let this cup pass.” He was honored by it — because the prayer ended in “not as I will, but as you will.” Bring your actual darkness to God. Then stay at the prayer until you reach “your will be done.”

3. Recognize your own face in the sleeping disciples — and stop trusting your own resolve.

(Affections/worship) Peter swore he would never deny Jesus. He was the last man to say it and said it the most emphatically (v. 35). Hours later he was cursing and swearing that he did not know the man (v. 74). The disciples were not uniquely cowardly — they were ordinarily human, and ordinary human resolve collapses under sufficient pressure. The spiritual application is not “try harder.” It is: stop building your confidence on what you think you are capable of. The disciples’ failure is in the text not to shame them permanently but to expose the structural error of self-trust — so that the reader would transfer that trust to the one who did not sleep, did not flee, and did not deny.

4. Receive the Lord’s Supper as what Jesus said it was — a covenant sealed in blood for the forgiveness of your sins.

(Mind/belief) “This is my blood of the covenant, poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins” (v. 28). This is not an idea about Jesus — it is a cup handed to you. The same words Jesus spoke at the table that night are spoken over the elements every time the church gathers for the Supper. The forgiveness of sins — not a vague spiritual improvement, not moral encouragement, but the specific remission of specific guilt — is what the cup announces and seals. Come to the table knowing what you are receiving: not merely a symbol of a distant event, but a covenant pledge, sealed by the blood of the one who said it, given to you personally, that your sins are forgiven.

5. Return to Jesus after you have denied him — because he predicted your failure and arranged for your restoration before it happened.

(Will/behavior) Before the denial, Jesus said: “After I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee” (v. 32). He announced restoration before the failure occurred. When Peter “went out and wept bitterly” (v. 75), there was already a meeting arranged on the other side of his sin. This is not a general principle about God forgiving people who fail — it is a specific word: Jesus knows exactly how his people will fail, and he has already arranged to meet them afterward. The application is concrete: if you are living in the aftermath of your own denial — spiritual

cowardice, public failure, the sin you were certain you would never commit — the word of Matthew 26 is that Jesus knew, went forward anyway, and is already waiting in Galilee.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Matthew 26 teaches that the death of Jesus was an act of sovereign, willing, covenantal obedience — not a fate suffered but a cup accepted. The passage establishes that God was not a bystander to the betrayal, arrest, and trial of His Son; He was the architect of the redemption being accomplished through these events. The institution of the Supper (vv. 26–29) ties the death directly to the covenant structure of Scripture — the new covenant promised in Jeremiah, sealed by blood as the Sinai covenant was sealed by blood, now ratified in the body and blood of the Son. The Gethsemane prayer (vv. 36–46) displays the full humanity of the Son without diminishing His deity — the one who prays “let this cup pass” is the same one who says “not as I will, but as you will,” and who rises from prayer to go forward. Matthew 26 teaches that salvation cost everything it cost not because God’s plan went wrong but because the weight of sin and the certainty of forgiveness are both real.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: Matthew 26 is a foundational passion text for Reformed soteriology because it holds together what Reformed theology insists cannot be separated: divine sovereignty and human responsibility, the substitutionary weight of the cup, and the covenant structure of atonement. The cup of Gethsemane is not metaphor — it is the cup of wrath that Isaiah and the prophets announced, taken voluntarily by the one who alone could drink it on behalf of others. The Reformed doctrine of definite atonement finds its pulse here: “poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins” (v. 28) — not a general possibility but a covenant act with a specific people in view. The disciples’ failure is not incidental to the chapter’s theology; it is structural — Romans 5:8 (“while we were still sinners”) is happening in real time. Reformed theology’s insistence that perseverance is God’s act, not ours, is confirmed by Peter’s failure and Jesus’ prior provision: “After I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee” (v. 32) — spoken before the denial, not after. The chapter as a whole displays what the Reformed tradition calls the *pactum salutis* — the eternal covenant between Father and Son — being enacted in time and history: the Son obeys, the cup is accepted, the covenant is sealed, and the people are secured.

Main Takeaway

Jesus did not stumble into the cross — He walked into it with His eyes open, knowing the cup, knowing the betrayal, knowing every name that would flee. The chapter ends with

Peter weeping in the dark, and the reader is meant to recognize themselves there. But the word that frames even Peter's failure is already on the table: "I will go before you to Galilee." Cast yourself on the one who went alone into the darkness so that you would never have to go there — and find him already waiting on the other side of your worst failure.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Preaching the disciples as moral examples in either direction.** The most common mishandling of Matthew 26 is to preach the disciples either as moral failures to be avoided ("don't be like Peter") or as moral heroes to be emulated ("be like the woman with the alabaster flask"). Both approaches produce moralism. The disciples' failure is not primarily a moral lesson — it is a theological display of the human condition that makes the cross necessary and meaningful. The woman's act is commendable, but her commendation flows from her response to *who Jesus is*, not from her courage as a character virtue to adopt. Anchor everything in the person and work of Jesus; application to the reader flows from there.
- **Psychologizing Gethsemane as primarily about fear of physical death.** To preach Gethsemane as Jesus afraid of crucifixion misses the theological center of the scene entirely. The cup is the cup of divine wrath — the crushing weight of bearing the sin of the world before a holy God. Physical courage in the face of death was common in the ancient world; what Jesus was facing in Gethsemane was categorically different. Failing to preach the cup as wrath evacuates the scene of its substitutionary content and reduces the prayer to a meditation on mortality.
- **Extracting the Lord's Supper institution from its Passover context.** The words of institution in verses 26–29 are spoken at a Passover meal, and the typological freight of that context is load-bearing. The Passover was a memorial of redemption-by-blood, a covenant meal, and an anticipation of the greater exodus. To preach the Supper institution without the Passover framing is to lose the covenantal depth of what Jesus is claiming. He is not creating a new religious ceremony; He is announcing that the Passover has arrived at its fulfillment — and that all future celebrations of it will be oriented toward Him.
- **Treating the chapter's pacing as uniform.** Matthew 26 contains at least six distinct movements, and they demand different preaching registers. The supper table is intimate and covenantal; Gethsemane is anguished and solemn; the arrest is chaotic and charged; the trial is mock-judicial and deeply ironic; Peter's denial is tragic. A sermon or teaching series that moves through these sequences at uniform pace and tone will not honor the text's own emotional and theological architecture. Let the text control the register.
- **Missing the irony of the trial scene.** Jesus is condemned for blasphemy for claiming to be the Son of Man who will come on the clouds of heaven (v. 64). He is

condemned for telling the truth. This is one of the most profound ironies in all of Scripture — the Judge of all the earth being judged, and being condemned for the one claim He was making that was unambiguously correct. Preaching that does not surface this irony misses the chapter's deepest theological chord: the legitimacy of every claim Jesus made about himself is confirmed, not refuted, by the verdict against him.

- **Ending the chapter with Peter's tears as guilt rather than as the doorway to grace.** "He went out and wept bitterly" (v. 75) is the chapter's final image. It can be preached as despair — and some treatments leave it there, using Peter's failure as the emotional close of the passage. This misreads the narrative. Matthew 26 does not stand alone; it stands within a Gospel that ends with the risen Jesus meeting the disciples in Galilee (28:16–20) — exactly where He promised to go before them (26:32). Peter's tears are real and right — they are genuine repentance. But to close on the tears without pointing toward Galilee is to preach half a text. The chapter's final note is not condemnation; it is the anguish that precedes restoration.