

Judas who Betrayed Jesus

Text:

Matthew 26:1-25

When Jesus had finished all these sayings, he said to his disciples, "You know that after two days the Passover is coming, and the Son of Man will be delivered up to be crucified." Then the chief priests and the elders of the people gathered in the palace of the high priest, whose name was Caiaphas, and plotted together in order to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him. But they said, "Not during the feast, lest there be an uproar among the people."

Now when Jesus was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, a woman came up to him with an alabaster flask of very expensive ointment, and she poured it on his head as he reclined at table. And when the disciples saw it, they were indignant, saying, "Why this waste? For this could have been sold for a large sum and given to the poor." But Jesus, aware of this, said to them, "Why do you trouble the woman? For she has done a beautiful thing to me. For you always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me. In pouring this ointment on my body, she has done it to prepare me for burial. Truly, I say to you, wherever this gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will also be told in memory of her."

Then one of the twelve, whose name was Judas Iscariot, went to the chief priests and said, "What will you give me if I deliver him over to you?" And they paid him thirty pieces of silver. And from that moment he sought an opportunity to betray him.

Now on the first day of Unleavened Bread the disciples came to Jesus, saying, "Where will you have us prepare for you to eat the Passover?" He said, "Go into the city to a certain man and say to him, 'The Teacher says, My time is at hand. I will keep the Passover at your house with my disciples.'" And the disciples did as Jesus had directed them, and they prepared the Passover. When it was evening, he reclined at table with the twelve. And as they were eating, he said, "Truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me." And they were very sorrowful and began to say to him one after another, "Is it I, Lord?" He answered, "He who has dipped his hand in the dish with me will betray me. The Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that man if he had not been born." Judas, who would betray him, answered, "Is it I, Rabbi?" He said to him, "You have said so."

Introduction:

Until this point in the story of Jesus Judas is only a name on the list of the twelve men that Jesus chose to be his special representatives, but even there he is identified as “Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him” (Matthew 10:4). It is with this one infamously cowardly act that he is forever linked, and when his name is mentioned in the Gospels it is most often qualified by the words: “who betrayed Jesus.” Apart from this we know only a couple of small details. He was called “Judas Iscariot”, which most likely means “man of Kerioth”, a city in either Moab or southern Judah. If this is the case, then he is the only one of the twelve that was not a Galilean like Jesus. The second detail is that he was the treasurer of the Jesus’ band of disciples. John tells us that not only did he have the money bag, but that he was a thief and stole from it (John 12:6). This is not much to go on when we are trying to comprehend his reason for what may be history’s most treacherous deed.

The fall and treachery of Judas presents us with a great moral problem. In a very true sense, all sin is a mystery, but the difficulty grows greater with the greatness of the guilt, with the smallness of the motive for doing wrong, and with the measure of the knowledge and grace bestowed on the offender. In every way the treachery of Judas would seem to be the most mysterious and unintelligible of sins. How could one chosen as a disciple, and enjoying the grace of apostleship and the privilege of intimate friendship with the Divine Master, be tempted to such gross ingratitude for such a paltry price? And the difficulty is even greater when we recall that the Master so basely betrayed was not hard and stern, but a Lord of loving kindness and compassion. Looked at in any light the crime is so incredible, both in itself and in all its circumstances, that it is no wonder that many attempts have been made to give some more intelligible explanation of its origin and motives, and, from the wild dreams of ancient heretics to the bold speculations of modern critics, the problem presented by Judas and his treachery has been the subject of strange and startling theories.

It is not my purpose to review these theories, but to say what we can say based upon what we know from the Gospels in order to learn what we can from Judas’ great failure. What I want to do first is to look at three things that we might use to excuse or to mitigate Judas’ crime, and to see why they are not excuses. Then we will try to understand why he did what he did. This is of course not done to resolve the historical questions associated with Judas, but to learn something about sin and temptation so that we might avoid the error of Judas.

I. Judas didn’t understand

Since early times various theories have been propounded postulating that Judas either understood better than the others what Jesus was doing, and did what he did to put God's plan into action, or that he was disappointed because Jesus had not turned out to be the Messiah that he had expected him to be, and in his disappointment he delivered him to his enemies.

It would be impossible and unnecessary in one short sermon to analyze these theories. What we can say, and what is important to say is that none of Jesus' followers understood what he was doing. It is obvious as we read the Gospel accounts that none of them expected Jesus to be crucified, and after he was they were not expecting his resurrection. In fact the crucifixion was the great disappointment of their lives. It threw them into profound sorrow and grieving equaled only by their great joy when they discovered that he was alive. Their misunderstanding was not due to Jesus hiding his plans from them. He tried to explain what was going to happen, but they were so obsessed with their own vision of messianic glory that they simply could not conceive of the glory of the cross. This being the case, however, they still remained loyal to Jesus. If they did not understand him and the way that he was taking, they believed in him and loved him. It is true that they fled, and that Peter denied him, but these acts were due to understandable fear. There was no treachery in these acts, as there was in the act of Judas, only human weakness. This is the reason Peter is able to repent of his act, find forgiveness, and fulfill the mission Christ had given him while Judas could only end his life in a tragic suicide.

We cannot excuse Judas on the basis of either superior or inferior knowledge. He, like the others was called to love, trust, and follow Jesus. Like the disciples, we too have moments when our loyalty to Christ must carry us. We may not understand what is happening; our hearts may be full of fear, and we may feel like fleeing, but if we "know who we have believed", our love for Christ and our loyalty to him will keep us faithful. We will be like Peter in John 6. When many are deserting Jesus, and Jesus asks the twelve if they are also going to desert him, and Peter replies for the group: "to whom shall we go Lord thou has the words of eternal life."

II. The Devil made him do it

Both Luke and John tell us that before Judas betrayed Jesus Satan entered into him, or put it into his heart to do it. Satan was certainly the instigator of the entire plot against Christ. There is no doubt that he was present and active in Jerusalem at that moment. But Judas was not the only one that he was after. Luke also tells us that when Jesus was warning Peter that he would deny him he told him: "Simon, Simon, behold, Satan hath desired *to have* you, that he may sift *you* as wheat: But I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not: and when thou art converted, strengthen thy brethren."

All of us may be subject to the attacks of the devil. He is a “roaring lion seeking whom he may devour.” But his power is limited. He that is in us is greater than he that is in the world, and those who resist him will find that he must flee from them. He can only enter an open door. So long as our love and loyalty to Christ motivate us, we need not fear his attacks. If Satan put it in Judas’ heart to deny his Master, it was because his heart was open to the voice and temptation of the enemy. The Devil will sift us as wheat if we abandon the one who can deliver us from temptation, but so long as the sincere prayer of our heart is “lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil” there will always be “a way of escape”.

The Devil made me do it is always a flimsy excuse. The Devil can make us do nothing unless we are a willing participant. The ears of Judas’ heart were open to Satan because his heart had already been taken over by greed or jealousy or some other deadly sin. This is always the case. When we let “sin reign”, whatever that sin is, we close our ears to the Holy Spirit and open them to the temptations of the Devil. Once that happens, the worst is possible, and in Judas’ case the worst occurred.

III. It was Predestined

In the next to the last verse of our text, Jesus, speaking of Judas says: “The Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that man if he had not been born.” In saying this, he affirms two things that we sometimes have a hard time reconciling: God’s sovereign plan, and human responsibility.

Someone might say: “but if Christ had to die, wasn’t Judas just a necessary actor in carrying out God’s plan. Why should he be held accountable?” The first part of this statement is true. Christ was going to die. It had been determined by the Father from all eternity that he would bring about human salvation in this way. His death, which was a part of God’s eternal plan, would be both the result and the end of human wickedness. It was the result of human wickedness first, in the sense that it was the salvation of humans from sin that motivated it, but secondly, in the sense that human wickedness would perpetrate it. Jesus died because particular human individuals willed his death. The Sanhedrin plotted against him and condemned him. Judas betrayed him. Pilate condemned him, and Roman soldiers nailed him to the cross on which he died. Had these individuals not done what they did, he would not have died. They are all responsible for their acts.

Peter says to those listening on the day of Pentecost essentially the same thing Jesus says to Judas when he says: “Ye men of Israel, hear these words; Jesus of Nazareth, a man approved of God among you by miracles and wonders and signs, which God did by him in the midst of you,

as ye yourselves also know: Him, being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain” (Acts 2:22-23). The fact that the death of Christ was God’s great redemptive act, predestined from all eternity, takes away none of the guilt of those who actively participated in it. They were not preprogrammed robots. They were free humans beings who freely chose to perform acts of wickedness. Neither Judas nor the others can be excused on this basis, nor can we.

Conclusion:

What then can we learn from Judas? We learn that we must accept responsibility for the outcome of our lives. Each of us as individuals must bear the responsibility for our own sins and failures. Judas was given an unimaginable opportunity. He was one of only twelve men chosen to be the representatives of Jesus Christ. Like the others, he was taught personally by Jesus; he experienced all of his love, wisdom, and goodness firsthand, and yet he failed. He failed because he allowed sin and evil to dominate him, to take possession of him instead of clinging to the one who could have saved him.