

Text: Various, from a synopsis of the Gospels

 Ash Wednesday (1st Lent Midweek)

The Betrayer

In the name of him who was betrayed with a kiss, dear friends in Christ: In this year's series of Lenten evening meditations, we'll be studying "the people of the passion". We'll be taking a close look at some of the main characters who were present at our Lord's suffering and who played key roles in his arrest, trial, and crucifixion; people like disciples Judas and Peter, Caiaphas the high priest, Pontius Pilate the Roman governor, and a few others. In the process we'll consider their actions, their motivations, their failings, and their sins – and this not merely to hold them up as objects of scorn, but rather as mirrors of our own souls. As we sang in the last hymn, "one common sin infects us all". So, whatever faults we may find in these people, we will surely find in our own dark souls if we're examining ourselves honestly. And that's what this penitential season is all about: self-examination and repentance that will lead to greater faith in and reliance on our Lord Jesus Christ.

We begin with Judas Iscariot, who is probably the most reviled and hated man in Christendom. Throughout the history of the church, people have taken a special delight in heaping insult on him – and sometimes they seem almost frustrated that they can't inflict injury on him. I've mentioned before how in marketplaces throughout Brazil and other Latin American countries on Good Friday evening they hang straw-stuffed effigies of Judas from tall poles. They often put small coins, candies, and other treats in with the filling. Then on the afternoon of Holy Saturday, they invite children to strike these hanging Judases with long sticks, which causes the goodies to fall to the ground where they are gathered by urchins screaming with glee. If I'm not mistaken, the Mexican custom of the piñata is a spinoff of this. Anyway, when no more treats can be beaten out, the older boys and young men cut the effigies down and drag them through the streets where they are beaten, kicked, spat upon, and ultimately burned: everyone involved attempting to show their devotion for Jesus by their brutality directed against an artificial Judas. Somehow I believe the Lord would appreciate their devotion more if these young hooligans spent more time attacking the real enemy within their own hearts rather than a fake one outside it.

Nevertheless, my point stands: we love to hate Judas. He committed what most would agree is the worst crime in human history. No one likes a traitor. For someone to pretend to be your friend while stabbing you in the back is despicable; but Judas did it to Jesus, to Christ the Lord. He betrayed the Lord of glory for thirty pieces of silver.

But it's actually more than just his betrayal of Jesus that bothers us; it's also all the advantages he had. I mean, here was a guy handpicked by Jesus to be one of his twelve closest disciples. And it's not like he was an unbeliever. No, he was a faithful man. He believed in Jesus. He was glad to be a disciple – was no doubt honored to have been chosen. And as a disciple, he heard Jesus preach and teach. He saw the miracles with his own eyes—he even helped perform some of them. At the feeding of the 5000, he helped distribute the miraculously multiplying bread and fish. Every time

he put his hand into his small lunch basket, there was more food there. More than that, at least once and probably twice, Jesus sent his disciples out in pairs with directions to proclaim the Gospel. And he gave them the authority to cast out demons and the power to heal the sick, which they did. They returned amazed with what they'd accomplished saying to Jesus, "Even the demons submit to us in your name." Judas did this too. He was one of the good guys. He too fell down and worshipped Jesus when the Lord calmed the storm. And he stood with others in agreement when Simon Peter confessed to Jesus, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

All of which makes us wonder: what went wrong? How did Judas, who was so richly blessed with the truth of God's revelation in Christ Jesus—and who believed it – how did he go astray? What made him decide to cooperate with and join the enemies of Jesus?

A lot of ink has been spilled trying to answer these questions. I've read all kinds of elaborate theories as theologians and others have set forth their speculations; but I don't give them much credit. There's a philosophical principle known as Occam's razor, which states that the simplest solution to a problem, the one that makes the fewest assumptions, is usually the right one. And the Scriptures tell what Judas' motivation was. He loved money. We're told that he served as the keeper of the purse for the group. He was their treasurer. When people gave Jesus money to support his ministry, and we know he had several regular donors, and no doubt in addition to this many who were healed also made contributions to Jesus in thanksgiving, Judas was the one who received and kept these funds. He also made disbursements for things like food, clothing, sandals, lodging, and whatever else the group needed. We know that he was at times directed by Jesus to give to aid the poor and needy from these funds.

And while performing these tasks Judas developed a case of sticky fingers. He realized that there was a lot of money going through his hands, and that no one would miss a little now and then. He also heard what Jesus taught about not worrying about tomorrow – that the Lord knows our needs and has promised to take care of us; but it's so much easier to trust the money you have in your hand than what the Lord has promised to do tomorrow. So he started keeping some for himself. At first he probably felt guilty about it. But you know how sin works its way in. What's so objectionable at first gets easier each time the line is crossed. Before long, you're justifying it. "I'm entitled to my share. I have to think about my future. If I don't look out for myself, no one will."

That's when he started playing the game. Walk along with Jesus and the rest of the disciples pretending that everything is all right, and knowing that he was keeping a dirty secret and cheating on the entire group – keeping for himself and his own selfish interests money that was given to support the work of the Lord. We call it hypocrisy. He became good at it too. When Mary of Bethany anointed the feet of Jesus with costly perfume, he became indignant. "What a terrible waste! Why, we could have sold that perfume and raised so much money to give to the poor!" In truth, he didn't care about the poor; he saw a lost opportunity to take his illicit share from what the sale of the

perfume might have brought in. My point is that Judas didn't on a whim just suddenly decide to betray Jesus. He had been doing it for a long time.

Regarding what we think of the betrayal itself, it's hard to guess what Judas was thinking. Some have suggested that Judas thought Jesus would use his divine power to keep from being captured. After all, he had escaped his enemies before. On the other hand, on several occasions Jesus had told them clearly that he was going to be arrested, condemned, and crucified – and that one of them would betray him. But Judas was not alone in misunderstanding Jesus when he said such things. None of the disciples got it. What we can say for certain is that Judas initiated the exchange. He knew that the enemies of Jesus wanted to arrest him, and he sought them out asking they'd give to hand him over in a place removed from the crowd. In simplest terms, his love of money, his reliance and trust in it, became greater than his love and trust in the Lord. He agreed to do the dirty deed for thirty pieces of silver, which is roughly what an average worker would earn in three months' time – a nice, tidy sum; but hardly a fortune.

It's safe to say that Judas did not know or fully anticipate what the consequences of his betrayal would be. Perhaps he didn't realize the extent of Jesus' enemies' hatred or that their plan was to destroy him. But that too is the way Satan deceives those whom he tempts. No one ever foresees what the results of a sin will be. And Satan is always on hand to minimize the consequences; like he told Eve in the Garden, "Oh, no, you won't surely die." It's the same with the spouse who gets involved in an extramarital affair. They never think through what the painful outcome of being discovered will be: how it brings shame, shatters the marriage, and causes the children to suffer. It's only later that they say, "If I had known, I never would have ..." But then it's too late. You can't take it back. The damage is done.

And that too is what Judas discovered. Oh, he tried. When he saw that Jesus was condemned he was filled with remorse. He tried to give the money back – to atone for his own sin, as it were. But there were no takers. The enemies of Jesus had what they wanted; and for them it was a bargain – twice over, because in the end, they got their money back too.

And Judas, who started down the path of self destruction when he began stealing from purse, completed the job himself. He is forever lost; but – and this is important – it's not because he sinned, not because he betrayed the Lord, not because he wasn't sorry (he was), and not even because he committed suicide. He is lost because he didn't trust in the love, forgiveness, and mercy of God in Christ Jesus. He had made a god of money. And when that god failed him, when that god could not absolve him or make things right, he didn't know where else to turn.

Thus the sad account of Judas stands as a warning to us who, like him, are blessed also to have been called to follow Jesus as a disciple. And as tempting as it is to want to heap scorn and violence on him, we will be better served by learning from his example to heap scorn and violence on the Judas who dwells in our own hearts. He is

there, you know. He shows up whenever and as often as we walk along with Jesus, pretending to be his friend, ally, and faithful follower, while at the same time keeping a dirty, shameful, secret sin. It's then that we are betraying Jesus with a kiss. And no, the other disciples may not be aware of it – as they thought Judas went off to run some errand of mercy when he left the table to go lead the guards to Jesus. But Christ knows who is betraying him. And listen: the Judas within is by nature self-destructive. If left to run his course, he will destroy you completely. That's the real irony here: people hate Judas because he betrayed the Lord Jesus. In truth, the greatest sin of Judas was that he betrayed himself.

The time to stop your Judas is now. Today is the day of God's grace. Be reconciled to God. Repent and turn from your sin – whatever it is. This is how you destroy your Judas before he destroys you. Turn from your sin and toward Jesus, and receiving his blood bought forgiveness, he will strengthen the New You by his Spirit and enable you to stand against all the wiles of Satan.

This, my friends, is the promise of Lent: that we walk with Christ repenting of our sin each day, and receiving from him forgiveness and new and everlasting life. May God grant it to us for Jesus' sake. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!