

People of the Passion -- Judas, the Opportunist

Ash Wednesday/Midweek 1

Grace, mercy and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

In this season of Lent, for 40 days we focus on personal repentance and the suffering and death of our Savior for our sins. Part of that focus is reading through the history of his suffering and death as recorded by the four Gospels. We heard the first part of that history tonight, and we'll continue that in each of our Wednesday services. As we read this history, Jesus is, of course, the main player. All is focused on him. And yet the story line also introduces us to several other characters along the way. Today and in the coming weeks, we will focus on an individual character... not to draw our attention from Jesus, rather, so we focus on each person so that we can better insert ourselves into this story to personalize our focus on the Savior. As we look at each of these people of the passion, we will quickly understand that we see a bit of ourselves in each of them. And just as each of these players interacted with Jesus in his passion, we also interact with Jesus during these 40 days of Lent. You see, the passion of Christ... that is, his suffering and death... is the response of God to something you and I did... namely, sin. In a sense, all of us are players in this passion history. It is our sinfulness and rebelliousness that necessitated the Son of God entering human history to rescue us.

Today we start by taking a look at Judas Iscariot. Yes, that's the Judas who betrayed Jesus. Of all the characters of the passion, perhaps Judas is the one that's hardest to associate with. He betrayed the Savior! For 30 pieces of silver (which really wasn't that much money, by the way) he betrayed the kind, loving, miracle working, truth speaking teacher that he had followed for 3 ½ years. "How could he?" we say. "I would never!"

Are you so sure? Let's take a closer look at Judas. Now the danger here is that we say more than we can say about these people of the passion. Truth is, the Bible doesn't tell us a whole lot about Judas. Let's look at the only two parts of Scripture that really give us insight into this man. He is listed among the 12. We know that Jesus called him to be a disciple. (And that's significant. It's not that Judas just sort of tagged along until Jesus let him in closer. No, just like the other 11, Jesus called Judas to follow him and be his disciple.) Aside from these facts, we learn a little about Judas in **John 12:4-6**. Jesus was a guest a Mary's house. (Sister is Martha. Lazarus is her brother...the one who later would die and be raised to life by Jesus.) Mary, out of love for Jesus, poured expensive perfume on Jesus' feet and wiped his feet with her hair. Here's Judas' reaction:

"But one of his disciples, Judas Iscariot, who was later to betray him, objected, "Why wasn't this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year's wages." He did not say this because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief; as keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it."

He apparently knew how to manage money since he was the treasurer for Jesus and the apostles. But he had a weakness. Judas loved money. Judas was greedy.

Now what is a money-lover doing following Jesus? Here's where we have to speculate a bit, but I don't think we're too far off from the truth if we say that Judas, like the other disciples, misunderstood who Jesus was and what he was all about. Judas saw Jesus as the Jewish Savior...

that is the one who would conquer the Romans and restore Israel to its former grandeur. Since greed and money were his weakness, could we be too far off base if we suggest that Judas was hoping to be treasurer in the new and restored Kingdom of Israel? Jesus would be the king, and Judas just might have a shot at controlling the tax revenue for the whole country. I don't know if that line of thinking is entirely accurate. So let's just say, Judas loves money, and he seemed to think he had an opportunity to get more of it as a follower of Jesus.

Now, as time went on, he must have become more and more disillusioned. Jesus spoke more and more of his coming suffering and death. His teaching was becoming more and more clear about the fact that he was not going to establish an earthly kingdom. Judas was probably getting more and more agitated that this Jesus business was not following the wall chart of growth and prosperity that he had forecasted. When given the opportunity to cut his losses, leave AND make a profit, the temptation was too great. Listen to Luke 22:1-6:

Luke 22:1-6 Now the Feast of Unleavened Bread, called the Passover, was approaching, and the chief priests and the teachers of the law were looking for some way to get rid of Jesus, for they were afraid of the people. Then Satan entered Judas, called Iscariot, one of the Twelve. And Judas went to the chief priests and the officers of the temple guard and discussed with them how he might betray Jesus. They were delighted and agreed to give him money. He consented, and watched for an opportunity to hand Jesus over to them when no crowd was present.

You know how the story ends. Judas betrayed the Savior. He met him at the Garden of Gethsemane with a small posse that came to arrest Jesus. With a kiss he identified Jesus as the man to arrest. When they led Jesus away, Judas recognized what he had done. In despair he returned the money... but the damage was already done. In despair, he went out and hanged himself.

APPL: We may think, "I'm no Judas. How could he!" But listen: don't underestimate your own capacity for evil. **"If you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall."** Those who say, "I could never!" have put themselves in a precarious situation. You could. And you might. And if you look at your personal history, I bet you can list times when you *have*... fallen. Small desires if left unchecked lead to greater desires. Desires lead to sinful actions. Sinful actions lead to greater sinful actions. A life trapped in this whirlpool is a life that's getting sucked into Satan's grasp for good.

What pattern of sinful desires and actions are spiraling out of control in your life? What is the desire that you have over and over again that you fail to stop? Greed? Lust? Laziness? Spiritual apathy? Recognize the danger! "I could never steal!" Maybe not today, but Satan will lead you one baby step at a time until you do. "I could never cheat on my wife... husband." Maybe not tonight, but Satan will lead you one baby step at a time until you do cheat on your wife. "It could never happen to me that I'd turn 40 never having made anything of my life!" Certainly not if today you're 22. But 18 years of baby steps, Satan can lead you to a wasted, purposeless life. "I would never do anything to harm my own health!" Maybe not in a sudden and drastic way, but Satan will lead you down a sedentary lifestyle, and into regular overeating, or hook you in a bad habit that damages your health a little at a time. No one sets out to die of a heart attack at age 50. It happens through years of unchecked desires and Satan getting us to take baby steps that damage our health.

Or how about this one: "I would never forsake God and stop worshipping him in church." Obviously not tonight. But yielding to sinful desires one at a time, Satan gets us to take baby

steps away from church and make rationalizations along the way when suddenly we find our selves rarely in church and far from the Word of our God.

If you're sitting there thinking, "It could never happen to me!" then I'm scared for your soul. "If you think you are standing firm, be careful lest you fall!" That warning isn't for the person sitting near you. That warning is for you! Judas fell. You have the very same sinful nature as Judas. You can fall too. Maybe greed isn't your weakness, but something else is. You know what it is. Today... right now... would you let yourself fully acknowledge both your weakness... and the dangerous damnable consequences of that weakness?

Okay, now listen carefully. Wherever you're at in this spiral... whether you're just at the edge of that swirl, very slowly moving toward the vortex, or whether you're already in the middle getting pulled down hard and you're not sure how to escape. Here's God says.

1) You call sin what it is. Big or small, this desire or wrong behavior that's got a hold of us is deadly. Acknowledge it right now before God. In church speak we call this, "Confessing." Confess your sin to God. Tell him about it. Let him know that you are aware of the eternal, horrible consequences of continuing in this sin. Put it out on the table before God. Hide nothing.

Unchecked desires and wrong actions spiral and get worse. As the spiral deepens, that spiral end with your soul in one of two conditions. (a) You either end up so far from God that you are indifferent and totally alienated from God. In other words, that sin that caught a hold of you and pulled you deeper so sucked you in that you now do it without thought or concern of what God thinks of the consequences. When that happens, Satan's got you. (b) The second place you can end up is where Judas ended up... in despair. When sin has a firm grasp on you, it's possible that you reach the conclusion that God could never forgive you. Your sin is too great, and God will never love you or accept you again.

Do you see that either way, Satan wins? If you are so caught in a sin that you snub your nose at God, you're destined for an eternity apart from him. If you are so caught in a sin that you conclude God will *never* forgive you, and you lose all hope of his love, Satan got you in that case too.

2) But here's the assurance that I want you to go home with today. When God leads us to repent of our sin... to put it on the table before him in genuine sorrow and turn to Jesus... he *always* forgives us. Always. He forgives us because his own Son lived the kind of life God requires... in our place. He forgives us because his own Son shed his blood and endured the punishment for every one of our sins. The blood of Jesus Christ covers all sin. Even the sin of betraying the Savior. The blood of Jesus Christ covers all sin. Including the sin that is troubling your conscience right now. When you lay your burden of sin and guilt at the foot of the cross, don't despair! But hear Jesus' promise that you are forgiven. Completely. Fully. I want you to tell yourself what God tells you: The blood of Jesus Christ covers all *my* sin. Everyone... would you repeat that right now? "The blood of Jesus Christ covers all my sin." Repeat it! Repeat it again!

Judas couldn't believe it. Through the Word of God you have heard today, and by Holy Spirit working powerfully in you, you do believe it, don't you? The blood of Jesus Christ covers all your sin!

There is no mistake you can make that God can't forgive, fix and turn for good. [Repeat.] Judas doubted this and hanged himself. God still turned his betrayal for good... the biggest good imaginable: the payment of sin was made for all mankind! Whatever mistake you have made and whatever damage it has caused, know this. The blood of Jesus Christ covers all your sin. And

your God is so powerful, that he will turn even your mistake into some kind of eternal blessing as you put your trust in him. He will. He promises.

We leave today not thinking how we could never have done what Judas did. Instead we leave humbled, acknowledging we have a sinful nature that is every bit as corrupt and capable of evil as Judas' was. But while Judas left this world in despair, we leave this church tonight with hope, with peace and with joy. For we have heard and believed Jesus' promise that his blood covers all of sins.

Thank you Jesus for shedding your blood for me. It covers all my guilt. You forgive all my sins. I thank and praise your holy name. Amen.