

Ash Wednesday

February 22, 2023 at St. Matthew, Port Washington, WI

## Judas

I am, without a doubt, one of the most well-known people in the Bible. And yet, no parents name their son after me like they do with Peter, Paul, John, James and others. Judah or Judas were very common names at the time of Jesus. That's why, in order to avoid confusion, I was usually called Judas Iscariot, which means "man from Kerioth," a small village near Jerusalem. That also means that I was the only one of the 12 disciples from Judea. The other 11 were from Galilee in the north.

Every Jew grew up hearing about the promised Messiah and how he would come to save God's people. When I heard about Jesus and the miracles he performed, I was curious. As I listened to him, I was drawn to him more and more and followed him wherever he went. I was a bit surprised and humbled when I was chosen as one of his 12 Apostles. When Jesus sent us out to spread the word and even to perform miracles, I was part of that. We did a lot of traveling and 13 grown men can eat a lot of food. We were very grateful for the many gifts people gave us. It made sense to have one person take care of the money, to be something of a treasurer. Again, I was surprised and humbled when I was chosen.

One day, I was really hungry and a vendor was selling figs. It did not cost much and since the treasury was for the disciples and I was a disciple, I figured it would be OK if I used some of the money for a fig. Besides, I reasoned, being the treasurer was extra work and I should get a little reimbursement for that. Then it happened again...and again. It became something of a habit. I liked being able to buy things. The more money I had, the more I could buy.

When Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey, it was more than obvious that the Jewish leaders wanted him dead. That's when it occurred to me that they would probably be willing to pay a lot of money to know when and where Jesus would be alone with no crowds around so they could arrest him. I approached them and they quickly paid me the 30 pieces of silver I asked for. That was the going price for a slave, about four months worth of salary. It was a decent amount of money, but it certainly wasn't enough to retire on. Still, I would have been able to buy a lot more than I normally could.

Many have tried to analyze me and figure out why I did it. Some suggest that I thought Jesus would simply walk away from his captors like he did the other times when people tried to grab him. Then, Jesus would still be free and I would have an extra 30 pieces of silver. I guess there's some logic to that. Still others suggest that I was so focused on Jesus being the political and military hero to free us from the Romans that I was getting a little frustrated with Jesus. And, so, I tried to force the issue. If I betrayed Jesus, they could arrest him. They would hand him over to the Romans so he could be executed and – THEN! – Jesus would fight back and the revolution would begin. That's quite a stretch.

I don't know if I can give you an exact reason why I betrayed Jesus. All I cared about was the money. Just like someone who is addicted to alcohol or drugs will do anything to get his next drink, or his next fix, I would do anything to get more money. Addicts are not able to think about the consequences and make a wise decision to stop. By giving into those sinful temptations so often, addicts have programmed their bodies and minds to ignore the costs and consequences. I had become so comfortable with my sin of stealing from the treasury, that I put money as more important in my heart than Jesus. It's no excuse, but all I could think about was getting the money.

To make sure that the soldiers got the right guy in the Garden of Gethsemane where I knew Jesus would be, I arranged a signal with them. I would kiss Jesus on the cheek which was a common form of greeting between friends. I acted as if I was Jesus' friend, but he saw right through me, into my heart. As the evening continued through the night, I saw that Jesus was NOT walking away. He was NOT fighting back. By the time the Jewish leaders condemned Jesus to death for claiming to be the Messiah and handed him over to Pilate to get him executed, I realized that things were going VERY BAD.

That's when I woke up, like a drunk waking up after crashing into another car and realizing what a terrible thing he did. It suddenly hit me how disgustingly sinful I was. How could I? Jesus had never done anything wrong and now, because of me, he was about to be killed! I felt sick. When the 30 silver coins first jingled in my pouch, it gave me a thrill. Now, every jingle reminded me of how evil I was. With the foolish idea that if I gave the money back things would be better, I went to the Jewish leaders and admitted my sin. But they did not care about me and did not take the money back. Desperate to get rid of the money and guilt, I ran to the temple, I ran past the altar where only priests were allowed to

go, and I threw the silver into the temple building itself, as if to show God how sorry I was and give the money to him.

The silver was gone, but not the guilt. I had no friends, no partners, no peace. I was willing to do anything to stop the pain of the guilt. I was such a sinner. How could anyone love me? How could anyone forgive me? How could anyone even stand to look at me? My life was worthless. Jesus was being condemned to death when I should be the one condemned to death. In a fit of madness and desperate to stop the pain of the guilt, I grabbed a rope, tied one end to a tree at the edge of a cliff and the other end around my neck. Then I jumped off the cliff. .... Hell is a very real place, where pain and guilt never let up. No relief. Eternal misery.

It surprises some people to hear that I did not go to hell for my sin of betraying Jesus. Yes, of course, it was a sin, but that's not why I went to hell. When Jesus died on the cross, he paid for the sins of the whole world, including mine. Jesus did forgive me, but I was so focused on myself and the devil filled me with such guilt that I despaired. I did not believe that Jesus would forgive me. That's why I ended up in hell. I did not believe. I rejected Jesus as my Savior.

You and I are more alike than you may think. Some of you might be thinking, "I would never betray Jesus like Judas did." You're probably right. But the same sinful nature that led me astray lives inside of you too. For me, it was the love of money. It still is for many. They focus on money and the things that money can buy so much that Jesus gets pushed aside. For others, it's pride which leads to bitterness toward others and self gets promoted over Jesus. For others, it's pornography and other sexual sins. For others, it's just laziness and leisure as they prefer to spend their time looking at their phones or TV screens. Why bother taking the time or effort to connect with Jesus? Every good blessing that God has given you can be twisted by the devil into some type of temptation. For example, let's say you have good health. What a blessing! The devil suggests, "You are healthy because you eat well and take care of your body. You are better than other people. You don't need God to bless you. You're going to live a long time. You don't need to worry about standing before the Lord any time soon." And on and on.

Tempting you to sin is the devil's first weapon. Then, when we do give into some temptation and sin with our hands, our mouths or our minds, the devil quickly pulls out his second weapon – accusation. "I thought you were a Christian. A Christian would not commit such a sin. God is

angry with you. How can a sinner like you hope to live in a holy heaven?" And on and on. He tries to lead you to despair of God's loving forgiveness just as I did.

The path of sin leads to hell. No matter what your sin or what your temptation, for the sake of your immortal soul, turn away from it. Repent! Look to Jesus who has already paid for your sin. The only thing that I am good for now is a bad example. If I walked and talked with Jesus for three years and I lost my faith, then do not think that the devil is going to stop trying to get you. Recommit yourself to your fight against temptation in any form. Recommit yourself to making your relationship with Jesus the most important thing in your life. Each day, recognize the sin in your life and turn away from it. Repent! Turn to Jesus on the cross where he already paid for every one of your sins and breathe a sigh of relief that you are saved. Amen.