

Matthew 27:1-5
Ash Wednesday

3-1-17
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Repent: Turn to Jesus; Don't Turn Away

(Matthew 27:1-5) Early in the morning, all the chief priests and the elders of the people came to the decision to put Jesus to death. {2} They bound him, led him away and handed him over to Pilate, the governor. {3} When Judas, who had betrayed him, saw that Jesus was condemned, he was seized with remorse and returned the thirty silver coins to the chief priests and the elders. {4} "I have sinned," he said, "for I have betrayed innocent blood." "What is that to us?" they replied. "That's your responsibility." {5} So Judas threw the money into the temple and left. Then he went away and hanged himself.

Tell me, what does the word “repent” mean to you? I think that for many people the word has a very negative connotation. They imagine some church official saying, “Ve have vays of making you repent!” But actually, the biblical definition of repentance is not a negative one. The Greek word for repent is metanoia. It means to turn or to change your mind. True repentance always involves a turning away from one thing and turning toward something else. Or in the case of true Christian repentance, it involves a turning towards someone else. In the Bible, God invites us to turn away from our sins and turn toward the one person who is willing and able to take our sins away from us.

In fact, that is the theme for a Lenten sermon series this year. Repent, that is, turn to Jesus. Those words are meant to be a warm and wonderful invitation from a gracious God. But you realize that with every invitation, also comes the opportunity to reject an invitation. Although Jesus opens his arms wide for every sinner, each one of us faces the very real temptation to turn away from Jesus and go our own way—and in so doing, separate ourselves from God forever in hell—which is why our sermon theme for today comes in the form of a warning, namely,

Repent: Turn to Jesus and Do Not Turn Away.

I expect every one of you can think of someone you know who was once a devout believer, who has since turned away from Jesus. Maybe it was a high school classmate or a member of your confirmation class. If you were to go through your confirmation class picture, how many of those young men and women are still active in a Christian congregation? How many of those who once confessed Jesus as their Lord and Savior now live in complete denial of his will for their lives? Or maybe you think of that prominent church member—wasn't he on one of the boards at church? And now he's left his wife and kids and wants nothing to do with God. Or maybe it's a member of your own family, someone you dearly love, someone who once loved Jesus as much as you do, but who now has kind of gone her own way. Someone who when faced with the trials and tribulations of life, rather than turning towards Jesus has instead turned away from Jesus.

My friends, as you think about those people in your life, as your heart kind of fluctuates between anger toward them and compassion for them, as you wonder where they are now and

where they will end up on the Last Day, understand that you're not the first one who has gone through the experience of watching someone close to you turn away from their Savior. I mean, isn't that what Jesus experienced with his good friend and chosen disciple, Judas Iscariot? I think sometimes when we hear the name Judas Iscariot we immediately jump to the end of his life and the horrible things he did to Jesus and then to himself. But let's not forget that there was a time when Judas was counted among a very select group of believers. Judas Iscariot (whose name likely indicates that he was from the town of Kerioth) was a man who Jesus handpicked to be one of his disciples. Judas spent three years learning at the feet of Jesus, There's no reason to think that Judas, at least for the majority of that time, was not a true believer in Jesus. Remember, Judas was one of those whom Jesus had sent out into the mission field with these instructions, "*As you go, preach this message: 'The kingdom of heaven is near.' Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons*" (Matthew 10 7-8). Imagine, Judas Iscariot preaching the Good News, driving out demons, healing people of leprosy, all in the name of Jesus. How does it happen that a man who had done all those things, a man who has witnessed one miracle after another, a man who was in Jesus' Inner Circle, could in the end not merely get disinterested, and kind of wander away from Jesus, but actually take an active role in bringing harm to Jesus?

Well, I guarantee you that is did not start with Judas waking up one day and saying "I think what I'm going to do some day is to hand my savior over to die, then take my own life and end up in hell." No, I doubt that was ever Judas' plan for his life. So then how does something like this happen? To go from believer to betrayer? Well, Scripture gives us some insight into what happened in Judas' heart, and at the same time, offers us a warning about what can happen in our hearts as well.

One might ask the question, what was it that proved to be the chink in Judas' armor? Where was that little bitty hole in his heart, where, if Satan could get his head in there, his whole body would soon follow, kind of like a snake through a hole in the wall? I think you know the answer to that question. The weakness that led to Judas' fall was his love of money.

Isn't that right? Do you remember how Judas reacted to Mary pouring that expensive perfume on Jesus' feet? He says in "righteous indignation, "*Why wasn't this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year's wages.*" (John 12:5) But then notice how John, by divine inspiration gives us a glimpse of what's going on in Judas' heart. John writes, *He [Judas] did not say this because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief. As keeper of the money bag used to help himself to what was put into it.*

Oh, maybe Judas's sticky fingers began innocently enough. A short-term loan from the money bag which he always intended to pay back. An exaggerated expense account. A taste for a few of the nicer things in life which he couldn't afford on his regular pay. A resentment toward people who wasted their money on church offerings, or in Mary's case, perfume for Jesus' feet.

The more that Judas fixated on the shine of the silver and the glitter of the gold, the more that Judas' heart was entangled in Satan's web. Until in the end, Judas' actions are no longer a momentary lapse in judgment. They are part of a deliberate and premeditated plot to sell Jesus for the price of a common slave. St. Matthew records the negotiation: *Then one of the Twelve--the one called Judas Iscariot--went to the chief priests and asked, "What are you willing to give me if I hand him over to you?" So they counted out for him thirty silver coins. From then on Judas watched for an opportunity to hand him over (Matthew 26:14-16).* At that point, Judas had already determined that he was going to be a traitor. His heart had already turned against Jesus. Granted, his action may have told a different story. Judas continued to put up a good front. He

ate and drank with Jesus in the upper room. He feigned ignorance when Jesus predicted his betrayal. Judas even arranged with Jesus' enemies a signal which would look perfectly innocent to the rest of the disciples. A kiss. The kiss of a friend and follower became the kiss of death—for Jesus, and ultimately—for Judas, too. Is it any wonder that St. Paul writes in 1 Timothy, chapter 6, *For the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil. Some people eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs. (1 Timothy 6 10).*

You realize, Judas is just one in a long line of believers who little-by-little turned toward sin and turned away from Jesus. The question is, are you or I next in line? And if so, what sin will Satan use to bring about our fall? What sin is he already using? Is he using lust? Will your desire to be with someone who is not your spouse separate you from God forever? If you had to choose between God and what's on that computer screen, who wins in your heart?

Maybe the sin that Satan is going to use on you is the one that took Judas down. In your heart of hearts, do you love what you can't afford? Are you willing to lie and cheat and hide things from your loved ones in order to get what you want? Do you put money in the offering plate or watch your spouse write out a check to church with a twinge of resentment, "Man, I'd love to have that money back." Have you ever chosen your job over your God?

Or maybe the sin that is ultimately going to separate you from God is your own self-righteousness. The idea that, "I'm not that bad of a person. I'll be just fine with God. Always been a believer, always will be a believer."

Wait a minute. Are you sure about that? What does Scripture say? *So if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall (1 Corinthians 10:12).* I mean, think about it, If Judas, who had every advantage in the world, could fall to the depths of betraying his savior, what makes you think that you won't fall into a sin maybe less dramatic, but no less damning?

If we're honest with ourselves, we'll admit that we've all fallen into sins which have separated us from God. Sins that filled us with shame. Sins that have hurt the people we love. The question is, when we commit those sins—and we will all commit those sins, the question is, where will we turn with them? Now, understand that whenever we fall into sin, Satan is quick to whisper in our ear, "Now that you turned towards sin, you can't turn toward Jesus. That would be so hypocritical of you. Besides, why would you turn toward Jesus? It's his commands that you have disobeyed. Jesus doesn't want anything to do with you after you've turned away from him. No, you have to find some other way to make up for what you did."

Isn't that exactly the lie that Judas believed? What does our text say? *When Judas, who had betrayed him, saw that Jesus was condemned, he was seized with remorse and returned the thirty silver coins to the chief priests and the elders. {4} "I have sinned," he said, "for I have betrayed innocent blood." (Matthew 27:3-4)* In an attempt to get the blood off his hands, and get the guilt off his heart, Judas turned to the religious leaders of his day for a way to make amends for what he had done. Their response? *What is that to us? That's your responsibility.* That's your responsibility. With those words ringing in Judas' ears, Judas reached out not to the Savior who loved him, but to the noose that would hang him.

My friends, you realize that the greatest tragedy in Judas' life is not that he loved money more than Jesus or that he betrayed an innocent man into death. No, the real tragedy is that even though Judas realized that what he did was wrong, he still felt he couldn't turn to Jesus. He believed the Devil's lie that Jesus could not forgive him. He believed that Jesus would not forgive him—when the fact is, Jesus had already forgiven him. Nobody loved Judas more than Jesus did. That's why, already there in the Upper Room, Jesus was saying, "Judas, think about what you are doing!" That's why, when they are in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus addresses

Judas with the title, “Friend.” That’s why, on the cross of Calvary, Jesus spread his arms to pay for every one of Judas’ sins.

My friends, when you stand in Judas’ shoes, remember what you heard today. Remember what God wants you to know. There is no sin you have ever committed—there is no sin you will ever commit—that Jesus has not already paid for. It is impossible for you to be more forgiven than you already are, in Christ. And yet every sin you commit has the potential to separate you from God forever. It all comes down to this: When you sin, which way will you turn? Will you turn away from Jesus? Or will you, by the power of the Holy Spirit, turn toward Jesus? No matter who you are, no matter what you’ve done, know this: Jesus stands with open arms for you. Believe it, and be grateful for it. For that, my friends, is true repentance! God grant it, for Jesus’ sake. Amen.