

“JUDAS STRIKES HIS BARGAIN”

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So why does he do it? Why does Judas betray his Lord? It probably belongs in the same general category of asking why we deceive each other and God. We find no satisfactory answers here. It could be as simple as Judas hearing Jesus familiar teaching: you can't serve God and money and making his choice. What a bleak choice he makes.

We recoil hard to think Judas does this for nothing more than 30 shekels. Then again, the money is not irrelevant in this sad case. John's Gospel earlier reports that Judas is also a thief. This is likely one more case of a treasurer pilfering from the common fund. We have all heard about people in sensitive places making off with the church's money. Our sinfulness is not only laced with lies. And lies are always the dead giveaway of evil. But one sin makes others easier, more credible, more manageable, more explainable.

One of the most confounding things about Judas' betrayal is how often evil, even darkest evil, cloaks itself in the insignificant. I mean, why do the chief priests imagine they need Judas' assistance anyway? Jesus allows himself to be very conspicuous, to be out there, right? Only days ago we heard about Jesus' very public Palm Sunday procession.

Is Judas to them just a handy informer with spot-on data about Jesus' current location? Likely not. They don't need help finding a guy of public parades and acts as visible as cleansing the temple. It has more to do with coopting someone from Jesus' inner circle to turn on him as part of their general campaign to discredit him and slur his good name. If we imagine the movement against bullying in recent years is insignificant, think again.

The money for Judas, the role of Judas, it's all cloaked in insignificance. It's all so trivial. What Judas does, and how the chief priests exploit it, all feels like for no good reason. Judas revels in the sheer evil of it. Evil mesmerizes him, like the undulating movements of a snake hypnotize us. As evil personifies itself, we see how sin conquers human life. We see the actual shape and dynamics of what life looks like under Satan's dominion. It is worth noticing, friends, because such perfidious movements still slither all around us.

And as though that isn't frightening enough, notice how Judas uses the holiness of the Jesus movement as a cover for the deep darkness of his intentions as well as his deed. A white lie becomes a black lie, a questioning of motives becomes an insinuation, soon all hearing these subtle manipulations inexplicably find themselves caught up in nothing less than character assassination. "This Jesus is only in it for himself...he doesn't care about us...He will bring the wrath of Rome down upon us...he is corrupting our religion."

I have served six churches. For too long I was too naïve or sentimental to believe this still happens. But it still happens. The holiness of the church becomes a cover for the darkness of abuse to lurk, hide, and exploit. Some pose as the caring citizen of the year and declare aloud things like, "Everyone here has the best intentions for the church." And it could be true. Or it could be exactly like the misty fog that Judas works beneath.

Right now I'm blessed to mentor one of the most faithful and exciting young pastors I've known in a long time, our associate pastor. It is one of my favorite parts of my ministry. The hardest part of mentoring is having to teach him about things like this to equip him. Be as innocent as doves, but as wise as serpents, Jesus said. And of the six churches I have served, the one I'm in now is the healthiest and cleanest. But I inform him anyway.

The lesson here is how dangerous it is to substitute pop culture's genial, sentimental blather for a gospel that cuts to the bone, like today's, the gospel of the cross. This lesson is as difficult for you to hear as for me to preach. God help us if we don't read it

We can't and won't understand what Judas does no matter how many times we go over it. Because what Judas does he does blindly. But this is no aberration. It is no odd quirk. For evil by its nature must blind itself to what matters most, to the most essential things. Evil can't do what it does with eyes open, because then it would cease to do its evil.

Today is all about the Jesus' death. Sadly, betrayal marks Jesus' time to die. Betrayal threads itself through the holy meal Jesus institutes in the Upper Room. Before serving them, before washing their feet, Jesus announces one would betray him, knowing it is Judas. "Sure, it is not I, Lord," they all intone. Except Judas chokes on that word "Lord." He substitutes another. "Surely, it is not I, *Rabb?*" Does anyone here wonder why? Yet humble Jesus still washes Judas' feet anyway. Has the contrast between good and evil ever been sharper, more vivid, or in bolder relief than in that moment? I think not. Amen.