

Disciple Series #10: Judas Iscariot, the Betraying Disciple  
Matthew 26:14-25,47-49; 27:3-5 (NRSV)  
By John Gill

Throughout history, there have been a few names which conjure up such negative connotations that you never hear of anyone naming their child that name. For instance, since the horrors of World War 2, very few babies have been named “Adolph.” And in more recent times, as we have been caught up in terror and war, I’m sure most parents have avoided the name “Osama.”

Well, perhaps the most cursed name in all of history has been the name of our disciple for this morning: “Judas Iscariot.” How many “Judases” have you known in your lifetime? For 2,000 years, virtually no one has named a child “Judas.” And who could blame them? There is no sadder, more pathetic character in all the Bible than the man, “Judas Iscariot.”

It’s too bad about the name, though, because “Judas” had been a very honorable name in Jewish history. “Judas” is a form of the name of the Hebrew tribe, Judah, the tribe that occupied the southern portion of Israel around the Holy City of Jerusalem. In fact, Judas probably was from the tribe of Judah, which would have made him the only non-Galilean among the 12 Disciples.

It is likely that Judas was named after that great nationalist leader of the Jews, Judas Maccabeus, who several centuries before, had led the Jewish people in a revolution against their Greek oppressors, and established a rare and brief period of Jewish independence from foreign domination.

By the time of Christ, Jewish independence had been lost – the Romans had occupied their land, and the people longed for a day when another “Judas Maccabeus” would rise up to throw off the Roman yoke. I’m sure that many children in Jesus’ day were given the honorable name of “Judas,” hoping that their son might be the one to free his people from bondage.

Perhaps Judas Iscariot had, as his boyhood hero, this great “Judas Maccabeus,” and dreamed that one day he, too, might play a role in liberating his people.

If that is so, then that might help us to understand Judas and his motives for betraying Jesus a little better – for, I believe that Judas meant well, but that his good intentions backfired. You might even say that Judas is the perfect example of that old adage: “The road to hell is paved with good intentions.”

So, what can we know about this man, Judas? As I have already mentioned, Judas was from a village in the southern part of the country, the only Judean among all the 12 Disciples – which would have made him an “outsider” from the start. In spite of being an outsider, Jesus and the others must have trusted and respected him (at least in the beginning) for they made Judas the treasurer of the group.

There is some reason to believe that Judas might have been a Zealot. (Remember – there was at least one other Zealot, named Simon, among the disciples.) But even if he wasn’t a Zealot, there is little doubt that he was a Jewish nationalist looking for the day when someone would come along and cast off the chains of Roman oppression.

I believe that Judas became a disciple of Jesus for just one reason. When he heard Jesus teaching about the “kingdom,” and when he saw the crowds that were following him, Judas must have thought he had finally found the “new Judas Maccabeus” – the new Messiah to set his people free.

But, as time went on, Jesus wasn't living up to Judas' expectation. He was taking too long to establish the "kingdom" he was always talking about. Judas became impatient, and decided to take matters into his own hands.

You know, I think the church has been a little unfair in its treatment of Judas. Judas wasn't 100% corrupt – if he had been, Jesus never would have called him to be a disciple in the first place. In fact, a case could be made for the argument that, instead of being a man of little faith, Judas had a great deal of faith in Jesus! He believed that Jesus could do anything – that, at his word, God would send a heavenly army to destroy the enemies of Israel and bring his kingdom to reality. Judas never doubted the power of Jesus, nor the fact that Jesus was the Messiah – at least as he understood the term. But his faith was misdirected.

Out of impatience, Judas decided to act. Judas didn't want Jesus to die! He just wanted to force the issue a little, compelling Jesus to play his trump card – to declare himself "king" and lead a holy war of independence. After all, hadn't Jesus, just the Sunday before, entered Jerusalem being hailed as a king? Judas wanted Jesus to be another "Judas Maccabeus" – but his plan backfired.

When it looked as though time was growing short, Judas decided he had to put his plan into action. He went to the priests, offering to betray Jesus for thirty pieces of silver – a paltry sum, really - worth only about \$30. You see, the money wasn't the motive – it was only a necessary part of his strategy.

Judas then led them to the Garden of Gethsemane where Jesus often went to pray, and betrayed him with a kiss. The Greek word used here for "kiss" implies more than a peck on the cheek, but a warm and caring embrace. You see, Judas doesn't feel he is betraying Jesus! Instead, he believes that, by forcing a confrontation he has given Jesus the opportunity to declare who he really is! I think that Judas thought this would be a glorious moment – the event that would launch the holy-war against Rome. Even the other disciples sensed it – don't forget that Peter himself brought swords with him to the Garden of Gethsemane.

Yes, I think Judas was proud of himself at this moment! Certainly, NOW Jesus would have to establish his kingdom of God!

But things didn't turn out as Judas had planned. Instead of heaven opening up and armies of angels coming to Jesus' aid, Jesus was arrested – and tried – and executed.

Judas must have been crushed. That wasn't part of the plan – that wasn't supposed to happen – but it did. And Judas was filled with remorse. He tried to return the blood-money to the priests, but they wouldn't take it. They wouldn't absolve him of his terrible sin.

Judas found that he couldn't live with the guilt of what he had done – so he went out to the edge of the city – and killed himself. A heartbreaking end to a misguided life.

So what is the lesson to be learned from Judas' sad life? I think it is this: We ought not to be too quick to pass judgment on Judas, because, in our own ways, we are all guilty of betraying Jesus.

No, we aren't literally responsible for Christ's death on the cross – but we do betray Jesus in many small ways every day.

Everyone here (listening to this message this morning) have been guilty of professing our faith in Christ, yet not acting very much like a Christian, at times. And, who hasn't tried, like Judas, to force God to fit our expectations, or to manipulate God's will to conform to our own desires?

Yes, when Jesus said to his disciples in the Upper Room, "One of you will betray me," our voices can be heard with the others when they asked, "Lord, is it I?" And the terrible reality is that – it IS! All of us are "Judases." Who is guilty? We ALL are!

One of the most powerful hymns we sometimes sing during Lent or Holy Week is "Ah, Holy Jesus," that speaks of this universal guilt we all share:

Who was the guilty? Who brought this upon thee?  
Alas, my treason, Jesus, hath undone thee!  
'Twas I, Lord Jesus, I it was denied thee;  
I crucified thee!

You know, I think the saddest part of the story of Judas is that he died not having seen Easter morning. What despair we would ALL feel if our last moment of life was spent in the darkness between that terrible Friday we call "Good," and the dawn of Easter morning. Judas never witnessed the Resurrection. How sad. How tragic.

However, I like to imagine a different ending to the story. What would have happened if Judas had not been so quick to commit suicide? Suppose instead of killing himself, he had mourned for his sins and thrown himself on the mercy of God like Peter did after denying Christ? What if Judas had been with Peter on Easter morning and looked into the empty tomb? And how might things have been different if Judas had been with the other disciples when they came face to face with the risen Christ?

I like to think that Jesus would have shown Judas, who had betrayed him, just as much mercy as he showed Peter, who had denied him. Maybe Jesus would have reached out and embraced Judas, and kissed him, and held him, and forgiven him. Maybe... but we'll never know, will we?

Perhaps as ones who also are guilty of betraying Jesus, there is hope for us as well – hope grounded in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. Hope that, in God's mercy, we might find forgiveness for our own betrayals of Jesus – and discover a new and victorious resurrection-life.

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Intro to Prayer:

We remember this morning how Jesus gathered his disciples together in the Upper Room – how Jesus shared the Passover meal with his friends, just before Judas betrayed him with a kiss. I think it is amazing to stop and realize that, even though Jesus was aware of Judas' treachery, Jesus invited Judas to sit at fellowship with him.

In fact, when we carefully read Luke account of the Last Supper, it is clear that Judas was present and participated in the sharing of the Bread and Cup. What a powerful testimony to the amazing grace of Jesus! Even then, Jesus was offering Judas an opportunity to repent.

And when we read the account of that night in John's Gospel, which features Jesus washing the disciples' feet (and Peter makes such a fuss About not having his feet washed by Jesus), the text implies that two of the feet Jesus had washed – belonged to Judas - who had already betrayed his Master! Can you imagine that?

Now that you know this, listen with fresh ears to what Jesus says right after he had washed the feet of ALL of his disciples:

(John 13:1-15 NLT) "A person who has bathed all over does not need to wash, except for the feet, to be entirely clean. And you disciples are clean, but not all of you." For Jesus knew who would betray him. That is what he meant when he said, "Not all of you are clean." After washing their feet, he put on his robe again and sat down and asked, "Do you understand what I was doing? You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and you are right, because that's what I am. And since I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you ought to wash each other's feet. I have given you an example to follow. Do as I have done to you..."

Knowing what Judas had done, Jesus still washed Judas' feet. Amazing.

Let us Pray:

What amazing grace is available to each and every one of us, Lord! As we consider the treachery of Judas in betraying you, Jesus, even if he had the best of intentions, it's hard to imagine that you could forgive him. I know I couldn't – I wouldn't. But, your grace is available to all. Apparently, even to Judas! Amazing, indeed!

Lord, we confess that we betray you every day – in big and small ways. As the hymn asks, "Who was the guilt?" And we must confess that each and every one of us is. Our "treason hath undone Thee." We "crucified Thee."

Thank you, Jesus, for extend your forgiveness and grace to each of us. Even though we betray you, you invite us to sit with you at the Table of Grace. Even though we have already sinned against you, you kneel before us and wash our feet. Amazing – Amazing grace!

And so, we accept your offer of forgiveness and grace! We can't begin to thank you, Lord, for the grace you have extended to us. May the closing words of that same hymn be our prayer: "Therefore, kind Jesus, since" we "cannot pay Thee," we "do adore Thee, and will ever pray Thee, Think on Thy pity and Thy love unswerving, not" our "deserving."

We thank you, Jesus, for including even sinners like us in your embrace – making us forgiven saints – children of the Most High God. Send your Holy Spirit on each of us on this congregation, that we might be empowered to live faithfully for you, in this life – and in the promised life to come.

In the Name of Jesus we pray: Amen.