

Theme: “The People of the Passion” – Judas

As we remember and reflect once again during Lent on how the real-life, historical drama of the Passion (or “suffering”) of Jesus Christ played out, we will be taking a look at some of the people who played a role—whether positive or negative—in the “Passion” of Jesus Christ. Now, it is obvious that Jesus is the “main character” and the most essential part of the “plot,” for He is the one who earned our salvation by His suffering, death, and resurrection. While none of the people we will be studying were anywhere near as essential or as important as our Savior to the story of mankind’s salvation we can still learn a great deal from each one of the “supporting” characters we will be studying each week. We will read from the four Gospels of the “roles” they played during the last days of Jesus’ life; we will examine their relation to Jesus; we will apply some of the lessons we learn from these “supporting” characters to our own lives, and realize through our study that, we, along with them, are also **“People of the Passion.”** We pray that this same Savior who is the focus of our Lenten worship would continue to be the focus of our hearts and lives.

The first “supporting” character in the Passion of Jesus that we will be studying this Ash Wednesday is **Judas: “The Disciple Who Turned Traitor.”**

Sermon Texts

(Luke 22:3-6) ³ Then Satan entered Judas, surnamed Iscariot, who was numbered among the twelve. ⁴ So he went his way and conferred with the chief priests and captains, how he might betray Him to them. ⁵ And they were glad, and agreed to give him money...(Matthew 26:15) And they counted out to him thirty pieces of silver...⁶ So he promised and sought opportunity to betray Him to them in the absence of the multitude.

(Matthew 27:3-5 – Jesus Taken Before Pontius Pilate) ³ Then Judas, His betrayer, seeing that He [Jesus] had been condemned, was remorseful and brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and elders, ⁴ saying, "I have sinned by betraying innocent blood." And they said, "What is that to us? You see to it!" ⁵ Then he threw down the pieces of silver in the temple and departed, and went and hanged himself.

(Acts 1:18-19, 25) ¹⁸ (Now this man [Judas] purchased a field with the wages of iniquity; and falling headlong, he burst open in the middle and all his entrails gushed out. ¹⁹ And it became known to all those dwelling in Jerusalem; so that field is called in their own language, Akel Dama, that is, Field of Blood.)...²⁵ "Judas by transgression fell, that he might go to his own place."

There are few, if any words which are more repulsive in the thought conveyed—or even in the very sound of them—than the term: Traitor! The very thought of a traitor is so vile, not just because of the betrayal of trust they make with their supposed friends or allies, but also because in the process the traitor also helps the *enemy* to succeed against their supposed friends. We despise traitors so badly in our country that the very name of our most famous traitor, “Benedict Arnold,” has been used for over two hundred years as a *synonym* for traitor. However, there is no traitor in the history of mankind that is more infamous than the one mentioned in our text—“the prince of traitors,” **Judas Iscariot**. His name has forever become a synonym for “traitor.”

Judas, however, was not always a traitor. He was once an apostle of Jesus Christ; one of Jesus’ chosen 12 disciples (followers), who were His closest friends; men Jesus Himself trained to serve as leaders of His Church and proclaimers of the Good News of salvation through faith in Him. The question we naturally ask is, “What happened? How did Judas turn from disciple of Christ, to traitor and betrayer of our Savior?” The answer to this question is one of a number of lessons we can learn from the life of Judas and His relationship to Jesus. Tonight, we will consider two of the most important lessons from the life of **Judas**, one of the **“People of the Passion”** of Jesus Christ.

We don't know much at all about Judas' early life. We are told that Judas' father's name was Simon (**John 13:26**), and that he was called "**Isca**riot," which means, simply, that he was from the town of Kerioth (**cf. Joshua 15:25**), which would make him the only apostle from Judea (the rest of Jesus' twelve disciples were from Galilee, a region north of Judea). One other significant piece of information we know about Judas was that he was the "treasurer" for Jesus and His 12 disciples (**John 12:6; 13:29**).

We don't know how he came to obtain this position as treasurer of the disciples. Some scholars believe that this shows that Judas was the most intelligent or most educated of the disciples. While that may or may not have been true his position as treasurer turned out to be an unfortunate one since Judas' fall from faith was intimately connected with the object that he had his hands on every day: Money! Now, let's be clear: money in and of itself is not evil, neither is having great wealth, but rather the Bible tells us, "**the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, for which some have strayed from the faith in their greediness, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows**" (**1 Timothy 6:10**). In that Bible passage we see a perfect summary of the tragedy of Judas' fall from grace. Judas' personal fatal weakness was **covetousness**, which is defined as "sinful desire." But in his *specific* sin there is a *general* warning and lesson we can learn from the life of Judas. The first lesson we will consider this evening is the "negative" side, which we learn from Judas: **1) All sins are dangerous.**

Judas had what we sometimes call a "pet sin." "Pet sins" are usually sins that we find ourselves falling into very often, and even though we might at times feel guilty about them, we feel that since we derive some sort of pleasure or benefit from them we take no steps to stop or separate ourselves from these "pet sins." We don't usually see our "pet sins" as dangerous; therefore we don't usually take them very seriously. "Pet sins," like all sins, always begin as sins of *desire*; sins of thought, or sins of the "heart." Often this is the reason we don't see these sins as "dangerous" or "serious" because we usually view sins of desire; the sins of our mind and heart, as being the "least" of the three kinds of sins: "At *least* I didn't say it!" or "At *least* I didn't do it!" we try and reason to ourselves. In fact, don't we often view the last two of God's commandments, God's commandments against the sinful desire of **coveting**, as sort of the ones that God "tacked on to the end" because they really aren't that important? Instead of realizing that God has chosen to spend not just *one* but *two* of His commandments on **coveting** and sins of desire! Yes, all sins, even "pet sins," even—and especially—sins of desire are dangerous.

Judas' particular "pet sin" began as **greed**, which is **coveting money** or wealth. That sinful desire, that seemingly "harmless pet sin," soon exploded into a number of shameful, sinful, and soul-destroying acts. We are told in the Gospel of John that even before Judas had decided to betray Jesus "**he was a thief, and had the money box; and he used to take what was put in it**" (**John 12:6**). Worse even than the physical act of stealing from the disciples' treasury was the fact that his **greed** and **covetousness** led to hypocrisy and the loss of his faith, which, Luke tells us "opened the door" for Satan to enter his heart (**Luke 22:3**), and finally commit the unthinkable act of betraying Jesus for a mere 30 pieces of silver (it's hard to say for certain how much this would be worth today, but really would the actual value or amount have made the betrayal any better or worse?)!

What is your "pet sin"? Is it **covetousness**, a "sinful desire" for something? Is it **greed**, a sinful desire to gain money, or perhaps you struggle with the sinful desire to *overspend* money, or have difficulty managing it properly? Is it **lust**, the sinful desire for sex, or perhaps it's some other sexual sin, whether of thought or action? Is it **jealousy**, the sinful desire to have something that someone else has been given? If so you'll probably also have a problem with *gossiping* about others and probably have a generally negative attitude. Whatever your "pet sin," whatever **covetous**, "sinful desire" you are most tempted by **IT IS DANGEROUS!** You can be sure that the devil will use it to try and bring about your downfall step-by-step, and piece-by-piece, just like he did Judas. With the Spirit's help, get serious about these types of sins and do whatever you have to do to keep yourself away from those types of sins and the even the situations that cause the temptation.

There is a soul-shuddering warning in the words “**Judas Iscariot...one of the twelve**” (Matthew 26:14), eventually became “**Judas Iscariot, who also betrayed Him**” (Matthew 10:4). It’s a reminder that it is not our “formal” relationship to Christ; it is not having our name on a particular church’s membership list; nor is it the fact that we are actively involved in a certain church or its activities that guarantees our faithfulness and salvation. There is only one thing that counts: A living relationship of faith with the Living Christ!

That “living relationship” is what Jesus was trying to restore with Judas even to the very end. He gave warnings in His teachings, “**Take heed and beware of covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of the things he possesses**” (Luke 12:15). He confronted Judas with his betrayal even before He committed it by predicting it would be him during the Passover meal, **Jesus answered, "It is he to whom I shall give a piece of bread when I have dipped it." And having dipped the bread, He gave it to Judas Iscariot, the son of Simon (John 13:26) ...Then Judas, who was betraying Him, answered and said, "Rabbi, is it I?" He said to him, "You have said it"(Matthew 26:25).** Even during the very act of betrayal by that treacherous kiss, Jesus reaches out to Judas and calls him, “**Friend.**” “**Friend, why have you come?**” ... (Matthew 26:50) “**Judas, are you betraying the Son of Man with a kiss?**” (Luke 22:48).

Jesus wants to preserve that “living relationship” with us as well, and He wants to restore it when we fall into any sins, including our “pet sins.” That is why He has given us the unchanging warnings of His Word which give us the eternally tragic example of Judas as well as other warnings against **covetousness, greed** and all sinful desires, “**for which some have strayed from the faith in their greediness, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows (1 Timothy 6:10).**”

This leads us to our second lesson for this evening: the “positive” side, which we learn from Jesus: **2) No Sin is “too Great” to be Forgiven!** There is a temptation for all of us to sort of “distance” ourselves from Judas when we read about him in Scripture, or cluck our tongues at his disgraceful act as if we’d never do such a thing. We shake our heads and wonder, “Why would Jesus ever choose an evil man like Judas to be one of His disciples?” When we think like this we need to ask ourselves a more important question: “Why would Jesus choose Me to be one of His disciples?” Was it because of our respectability, or our charm? Was it the desirability of our companionship, or our faithfulness? Was it because of the utter absence of any evil in our nature? No! We need to realize that we are not so distant from Judas, in fact, by nature we are the same! We too are **covetous** and **greedy**. We too have betrayed our Savior many times over—and for much less than 30 pieces of silver! We have betrayed Him for acceptance and popularity in the world; for approval from our unbelieving friends; or even just for a laugh! We may not have gone so far as to betray Him as openly and deliberately as Judas, but we have betrayed Him with as little as a look, or a word, or even by not speaking when we should have. We need to realize that it is only because of His grace that Jesus has chosen us, and only because of His blood that are we cleansed from our sins. We need to recognize our Judas-like ungodliness and rejoice that “**Christ died for the ungodly**” (Romans 5:8)!

If, like Judas, our “pet sins” have gotten out of control and have turned into words and acts of guilt and shame which plague our souls, do not continue to listen to Satan’s lies! Judas had believed the first lie of Satan, “**Your ‘pet sins,’ those sinful desires, aren’t dangerous!**” And after those “pet sins” had exploded into the sin of betraying Jesus Himself, he believed Satan’s second lie, “**Your sin is too great to be forgiven!**”

Judas eventually realized his sin. He admitted, “**I have sinned by betraying innocent blood**” (Matthew 27:4), but he only heard the callous, uncaring words of Jesus’ enemies, “**What is that to us?**” (Matthew 27:4). He didn’t listen to the words of His Savior, “**Come to me all you who are weary and burdened...and you will find rest for your souls**” (Matthew 11:28-29 NIV), or the words of the Scriptures that he knew so well, “**He [Jesus] was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; The chastisement for our peace was upon Him, And by His stripes we are healed...And the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all**” (Isaiah 53:5-6).

Judas, in his remorse only saw the enormity and darkness of his sin. He didn't see His Savior, reaching out for Him, still calling him "**Friend.**" In his despair, Judas hanged himself.

Dear fellow saints, if we have bought into Satan's lies that our "little" "pet sins" aren't the dangerous, soul-destroying monsters that they really are, then we need to turn to Jesus and find in His death on the cross the victory and power to quit those sins and keep ourselves far from the temptations that lead to them. If we, in despair over our sinful, black hearts have bought into Satan's lies that our sins are too great to be forgiven, then we again need to turn to Jesus and His sacrifice on the cross for US! At the cross we learn that we cannot think too blackly, too sorrowfully over our sins, but we may think too *exclusively* of them. If we do, they will drive us to despair. The truth is there is no penitence or remorse which is deep enough to get rid of even the smallest sin; but there is no transgression which is so great that it cannot be forgiven. IT HAS BEEN FORGIVEN! Christ already paid for it on the cross and it is there for us. "**If we confess our sins,**" the Bible tells us, "**He is faithful and just to forgive us *our* sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness**" (1 John 1:9). There is no "unforgivable sin," except that of refusing the forgiveness for sin. Look to Jesus for that forgiveness—the forgiveness He came to win for the whole world—even for men like Judas, even for us! Amen.