

Jesus Identified His Betrayer

Mark 14:17–21
Frank Walker, Ph.D.

After the disciples made everything ready for Jesus to celebrate the passover, they went to the upper room, sat down and ate. As they were eating, Jesus said something that caught them completely off guard. He said, *Verily I say unto you, One of you which you eateth with me shall betray me.*

The news of Jesus' betrayal shouldn't have caught them off guard. The Old Testament is full of betrayal. Just think of Joseph's brothers or David's friends and trusted advisors. Psalm 41:9 describes one of David's advisors, a man named Ahithophel. It says, *Yea, mine own familiar friend, in whom I trusted, which did eat of my bread, hath lifted up his heel against me.* David wrote this as a prophecy of Jesus' betrayal. Likewise, Isaiah 53:3 says, *He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief: and we hid as it were our faces from him; he was despised, and we esteemed him not.* In fact, Jesus told his disciples to expect betrayal. When he predicted his death the third time, he said, *Behold, we go up to Jerusalem; and the Son of man shall be betrayed unto the chief priests and unto the scribes, and they shall condemn him to death (Matt. 20:18).* But the disciples didn't know who would carry out this awful deed.

Jesus' words in the upper room left no doubt. The man who would betray him was sitting at the table. Our Lord's Ahithophel was there, pretending to be his friend.

But which of the twelve was it? Verse 19 says that the disciples were sorrowful or grieved by the news. You can imagine each of them looking around the room, trying to figure out who the culprit was. And although no one trusted Judas, he wasn't the obvious choice that night. Why? Because, according to John's gospel, he was sitting at Jesus' left hand, a place of honor.

So, in turn, each of the disciples asked, *Is it I?* The original is a little more precise than this. We could translate it: "Surely, it's not I, is it?" They expected a negative answer, thinking Jesus would say, "Of course not. How could you think I meant you?"

The Disciples' Inquiry

Two weeks ago, I said that all the disciples betrayed Jesus, but they didn't all betray him the same way. Eleven of them betrayed him out of fear and weakness. Their behavior wasn't good, but

they weren't nearly as culpable as Judas, who betrayed him intentionally, with malice and motivated by greed.

The disciples should have asked, Is it I? They were examining themselves as we all should. We should all ask, 'Lord, is it I?' Are we as committed to Jesus as we think we are? How many times have we betrayed our Savior? Maybe we betrayed him in a big way, maybe in something seemingly insignificant. Either way, we should search our consciences to find out. Is it I?

John's account of the incident in today's text exposes just how dastardly Judas behaved toward Jesus. The Lord had shown him nothing but kindness, encouraging him to abandon his plans several times:

- He started by washing Judas' feet to show that he had come to serve the needs of his people. When Peter insisted Jesus wash his whole body, Jesus said, *He that is washed needeth not save to wash his feet, but is clean every whit: and ye are clean, but not all (John 13:10)*. Judas was not clean. He should repent and abandon his evil plans. We know Jesus was talking about him because the next verse says, *For he knew who should betray him; therefore said he, Ye are not all clean.*
- Later, when Jesus told his disciples that one of them would betray him, they first looked around at each other. Then Peter encouraged John, who was leaning against Jesus' breast, to ask him to be more specific. In first-century Jewish culture, people ate while reclining on their left elbow, which means that Jesus was leaning against Judas, who was on his left side. Jesus then dipped his bread in the sop and handed it to him, a sign of love and friendship, encouraging Judas once again to reconsider his plans. Judas had to decide whether he would receive the sop as a sign of friendship or betrayal.

We know what Judas chose. John 13:27 says, *And after the sop Satan entered into him. Then said Jesus unto him, That thou doest, do quickly.* This shows the extent of Jesus' suffering. He didn't just wear a crown of thorns or feel the pain of cold iron nails piercing his hands and feet, but he experienced a loved one, one whom he had invested so much time in, turning against him. He had been betrayed before. When he was born, no one made room for him in the inn. John wrote, *He came unto his own, and his own received him not (John 1:11)*. But this was different.

Jesus' Explanation

In today's text, Jesus explained what Judas' betrayal meant. He said, *The Son of man indeed goeth, as it is written of him: but woe to that man by whom the Son of man is betrayed! good were it for that man if he had never been born.*

Jesus made it clear here that his betrayal was necessary and that he was committed to enduring it. It was written of him, i.e., his betrayal had been determined before the world began. He was *the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world* (Rev. 13:8). The fact that Jesus suffered and died according to the will of God is part of the gospel. Peter’s Pentecost sermon says, *Him, being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain* (Acts 2:23). He mentioned it again two chapters later. Acts 4:27–28 says, *For of a truth against thy holy child Jesus, whom thou hast anointed, both Herod, and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles, and the people of Israel, were gathered together, for to do whatsoever thy hand and thy counsel determined before to be done.*

But Judas would still have to answer for his sin, even though the Lord had determined that he would do it long before it happened. Jesus said, *But woe to that man by whom the Son of man is betrayed!*

Here, we can imagine Judas objecting. “But, Lord, I only did what you ordained for me to do. There was no way I could have done anything else. And besides, if I hadn’t betrayed you, you wouldn’t have died under a curse and no one would have been saved. So, in reality, I did something good for you and your people. I made salvation possible. You should give me some credit.”

What evil reasoning this is! Joseph’s brothers betrayed him. Later, when their father died, they supposed he wanted revenge, so they went to him and pleaded for forgiveness. The notion that their sin was justified because it led to Joseph’s exaltation as second in command over Egypt and their salvation never entered their minds. Even Joseph acknowledged the horror of their sin when he said, *Ye thought evil against me.*

We should never dismiss our sins, even when they seem to contribute to God’s plan. Why? Because every sin we commit inevitably does that. We can’t always understand how this works, but occasionally the Lord pulls back the curtain of his providence and gives us a brief glimpse of his purposes. But this never justifies our wickedness.

And here’s one thing that’s always true: the same sin we commit with evil intent, God has foreordained with good intent. Joseph’s full statement to his brothers went like this: *But as for you, ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive* (Gen. 50:20). Consider also Judas’ betrayal and our Lord’s crucifixion. Judas intended harm. He had had a part in the bruising of our Savior’s heel. But the Lord used his sin to secure the salvation of everyone who believes.

This is the doctrine of concurrence. Concurrence means that two things — God’s providence and our responsibility — run together, side by side. It’s not that man does something wrong and

then God comes along to clean it up and make something good of it. Rather, it's all the Lord's good will working through man's evil will, while also preserving the integrity of man's will, so that we always act according to our nature.

The result is that God holds us responsible for the evil we do. That's why we need the blood of Jesus. It's also why we can't dismiss or excuse our sins. To Judas, Jesus said, *Woe to that man!* Judas would suffer unspeakable pain and loss because of his evil choices.

At the end of verse 21, Jesus said, *Good were it for that man if he had never been born.* If Judas had never been born, he wouldn't have betrayed Jesus and been condemned for it. Ecclesiastes 6:3 says, *If a man beget an hundred children, and live many years, so that the days of his years be many, and his soul be not filled with good, and also that he have no burial; I say, that an untimely birth is better than he.* The evidence of this in Judas' case was his sad end. He tried to return the betrayal money, supposing it would soothe his troubled conscience, but it didn't work. Matthew says that he then went out and hanged himself. He judged that his own life had no value. Acts 1 adds one more detail. It says that he fell headlong and his bowels gushed out. This probably means that he botched his suicide. Maybe the branch he hung himself on wasn't sturdy enough. Maybe his rope was frayed. But whatever the reason, he ended up falling from high enough that he became just a splat — an unrecognizable figure of a man.

The Bible teaches that those who sin against children receive strict punishment. Jesus said, *But whoso shall offend one of these little ones which believe in me, it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea* (Matt 18:6). And in the Old Testament, there was no sacrifice available for people who sinned intentionally, i.e., not out of weakness or neglect or fear. Hebrews 10 explains, *For if we sin wilfully after that we have received the knowledge of the truth, there remaineth no more sacrifice for sins, but a certain fearful looking for of judgment and fiery indignation, which shall devour the adversaries. He that despised Moses' law died without mercy under two or three witnesses: of how much sorer punishment, suppose ye, shall he be thought worthy, who hath trodden under foot the Son of God, and hath counted the blood of the covenant, wherewith he was sanctified, an unholy thing, and hath done despite unto the Spirit of grace?* (Heb. 10:26–29).

Jesus once called Judas *a devil* (John 6:70). On another occasion, he called him *the son of perdition* (John 17:12). Judas is now experiencing the fierceness of God's wrath and will forever do so. Revelation 14:11 says, *And the smoke of their torment ascendeth up for ever and ever: and they have no rest day nor night, who worship the beast and his image, and whosoever receiveth the mark of his name.* What a sad end for someone who once ate with the Lord of glory!

This warns us not to follow in Judas' ways, but to cast ourselves on the mercy of the one he betrayed.

Consider all the mercy Jesus showed Judas. We've already mentioned the things he did in the upper room — washing his feet, seating him on his left hand, and warning him not to go ahead with his evil plan. But the Lord's mercy went way beyond this. God had given him life, allowed him to live in the world with family and friends, fed him, and so forth, also shows his mercy. Judas was especially privileged to have traveled with Jesus for three and a half years, sitting under his daily teaching. Yet, he turned against him.

Romans 2:4 says, *Or despisest thou the riches of his goodness and forbearance and longsuffering; not knowing that the goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance?* Judas didn't repent, but what about you? Has God's goodness led you to think that he doesn't really care what you do, that you can get away with just about anything, even something as wicked as betraying the Son of God? Or has his goodness taught you to turn to him more and more? Has it encouraged you to trust him, to love him and to show greater gratitude?

Embrace the Lamb who takes away the sin of the world. Cling to him. And if you should ever betray him, turn to him again right away and seek his mercy. Jesus is the only one who can help you. He alone can help you escape the everlasting misery of body and soul that your sins deserve. The book of Hebrews says, *Seeing then that we have a great high priest, that is passed into the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our profession. For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin* (Heb. 4:14–15). Amen.