

Matthew 26:14-16

¹⁴ Then one of the Twelve—the one called Judas Iscariot—went to the chief priests ¹⁵ and asked, “What are you willing to give me if I deliver him over to you?” So they counted out for him thirty pieces of silver. ¹⁶ From then on Judas watched for an opportunity to hand him over.

Matthew 26:45b-50a

⁴⁵ Then Jesus returned to the disciples and said to them, “Are you still sleeping and resting? Look, the hour has come, and the Son of Man is delivered into the hands of sinners. ⁴⁶ Rise! Let us go! Here comes my betrayer!”

⁴⁷ While he was still speaking, Judas, one of the Twelve, arrived. With him was a large crowd armed with swords and clubs, sent from the chief priests and the elders of the people. ⁴⁸ Now the betrayer had arranged a signal with them: “The one I kiss is the man; arrest him.” ⁴⁹ Going at once to Jesus, Judas said, “Greetings, Rabbi!” and kissed him.

⁵⁰ Jesus replied, “Do what you came for, friend.”

Matthew 27:1-10

27 Early in the morning, all the chief priests and the elders of the people made their plans how to have Jesus executed. ² So 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 pieces of silver 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.

⁶ The chief priests picked up the coins and said, “It is against the law to put this into the treasury, since it is blood money.” ⁷ So they decided to use the money to buy the potter’s field as a burial place for foreigners. ⁸ That is why it has been called the Field of Blood to this day. ⁹ Then what was spoken by Jeremiah the prophet was fulfilled: “They took the thirty pieces of silver, the price set on him by the people of Israel, ¹⁰ and they used them to buy the potter’s field, as the Lord commanded me.”

This is the Word of the Lord.

People of God,

The Pastor Search Committee of a church gave an update on their work: We do **not** have a happy report to give, as we have not been able to find a suitable candidate for preacher of this church, though we do have one promising prospect. We appreciate all the suggestions from the church members, so we've followed up each one with interviews or calling at least 3 references. The following is our confidential report on the candidates:

MOSES: A modest meek man, but poor communicator, stuttering at times. Some times blows his stack and acts rashly.

DAVID: A most promising leader, until we discovered he had an affair.

HOSEA: A tender loving pastor but has trouble with his wife.

JOHN: Says he is a Baptist, but definitely doesn't dress like one.

PETER: Has a bad temper. Had a big run-in with Paul in Antioch. Aggressive. A bit of a loose cannon.

PAUL: Powerful CEO type leader and fascinating preacher. However, short on tact, unforgiving with young ministers, harsh and has been known to preach all night.

TIMOTHY: Too young

JESUS: Has had popular times, but once when his Church grew to 5,000 he managed to offend them all and the Church dwindled down to 12 people. Seldom stays in one place very long.

Finally, there is JUDAS. His references are solid. A steady plodder. Conservative. Good connections. Knows how to handle money. We're inviting him to preach this Sunday. We believe there are possibilities here.

The Sellout Price

That fictional report reminds us how easily smooth-talkers or people with some kind of charisma can deceive us. Meanwhile we pass off humble and true servants of the Lord as being unsuitable. Our judgment of people can sometimes be clouded by our own prejudices or our expectations. And in the same way our judgment of ourselves can be unrealistic and even false. We may consider ourselves very good people but others see the truth for what it is. And, hopefully, we all will eventually see ourselves for what we are.

Judas is the saddest example in the Bible of someone who is so close to Jesus but still so blind to himself. Even after three or four years of listening to Jesus teach and watching him perform miracles, Judas is still filled with his own ambition and expectations. He cannot see Jesus for who he is. That's a very sobering thought for us to consider as we begin Lent.

Judas clearly follows Jesus for selfish ambition. Each time we meet Judas in the gospels, his own agenda comes through. Take just a few examples. Listen again to this passage from our Scripture readings:

Mt 26:14 Then one of the Twelve--the one called Judas Iscariot--went to the chief priests ¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ From then on Judas watched for an opportunity to hand him over.

Judas' held up a "for sale" sign over his devotion to Jesus. It had a price. It could be bought and sold. He would betray Jesus for the right amount.

People in our society say, "Everyone has their price!" That means that everyone has a point at which they'll sell out their convictions for personal profit. We have a price at which we will no longer stand by our principles. Someone, for example, might own a piece of property that has been in the family for a century. And he's really committed, it seems, to keeping it in the family. But then a real-estate agent offers him double the current market value because a buyer sees some potential in that land. The realtor doesn't care about the sentimental value the property has to the owner. He wants the land. And his offer makes the owner question how committed to that property he is. And when he takes the offer, he might say, "Well, the buyer gave me an offer I couldn't refuse." In other words, the man's commitment to the land of his grandfather is not total or unchangeable. He is willing to change his previous principles or convictions for the right price.

Judas' commitment to money becomes clear as we watch him in Jesus' ministry as well. It's actually just a week or so before the story we've read. Jesus and his disciples are having dinner at the home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus. The Bible tells us,

Jn 12:3 Then Mary took about a pint of pure nard, an expensive perfume; she poured it on Jesus' feet and wiped his feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.

Jn 12:4 But one of his disciples, Judas Iscariot, who was later to betray him, objected, ⁵ "Why wasn't this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year's wages. " [Then comes this editorial comment by John] ⁶ (Judas) did not say this because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief; as keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it.

Judas was the treasurer in the group. He had a real interest in money. And even though the disciples and Jesus never had much, Judas at some point took charge of the money and kept some for himself whenever he could.

All of this leads me to wonder, do we have a price at which we will sell out? Are our stated convictions as strong as we say? Or as strong as we think? Some people talk about being a devoted Christian. When they are young they have their principles: I'll never date anyone who is not a Christian. But then they get to be a certain age and they still haven't found that Christian man or woman they're hoping for. So they worry and start lowering their standards. They justify their change in conviction. They figure maybe they have to help God out a little... maybe the way Abraham thought he'd help God out by lying to some of the kings about Sarah being his wife. Or the way Sarah figured God needed help giving Abraham a son

so she sent Abraham to bed with her servant girl Hagar. Those are not acts of faith but of faithlessness and doubt. We sell out our convictions, claiming to be helping God provide, but actually it's a sign that we don't trust God with our lives and his plans.

Increasingly in our society, Christians are being asked to drop the standards of God's word for morality, sexuality, ethics and more. If we don't, we get mocked as being old fashioned.

Just think about it. Is there a situation that could arise in your life when your otherwise strong convictions suddenly are for sale? Do we have a point at which we set our principles aside? It doesn't have to be money that motivates us. It could be a desire to gain friends, a desire to look better in the eyes of others, a dream of some sort of success that drives us. Sometimes it's not until an opportunity presents itself—as it did for Judas—that we can actually be seen for who we are. Judas sold out for 30 pieces of silver. Do you have a price?

A Heart Checkup

It's not really the money. Thirty pieces of silver isn't that much. In OT times, it was the price of a slave. The Lord told Moses,
Ex 21:32 If the bull gores a male or female slave, the owner must pay thirty shekels of silver to the master of the slave, and the bull must be stoned.

Interestingly, when the prophet Zechariah asked the Israelites to pay him for the work he had done among them, they gave him just 30 pieces of silver. They meant that as an insult because they didn't value his prophecy. In response, the Lord told Zechariah to throw this "slave's wage" back into the treasury, another way of saying, throw it back in their faces.

So when we read in Matthew that Judas betrays Jesus for 30 pieces of silver and that Judas throw that money back into the treasury, it's an allusion to the story in Zechariah. Matthew is saying the priests were willing to pay almost nothing for Jesus. They were angry at Jesus for the scene he'd made at the temple overturning the moneylenders' tables and railing against the priests profiting off the sacrifices people bring to the temple out of devotion to God.

Thirty pieces of silver to the priests, then, is the price of contempt.

It's interesting that this phrase "30 pieces of silver" has had a negative meaning of contempt or betrayal for thousands of years, even though silver itself has been valued as a precious metal for the same amount of time or longer.

Clearly, the price Judas gets for betraying Jesus is secondary. Judas' heart is not right with Jesus and that's where the problem lies.

Judas follows Jesus for the wrong reasons. He seems to believe Jesus will become the king of the Jews who will finally overthrow Rome's rule over the Jews. That is a big deal among a lot of Jews in his day. They seek political freedom from

the government in Rome. They don't want to be ruled by a foreign power. And we can't blame them for that. In WW II when countries like Holland were occupied by the Nazis, some of the same feelings existed. It's the same in Ukraine today; they don't want to be ruled by Russia. In the first century, the Jews resent the unwanted influence of Rome because it means they aren't entirely free to live and rule their country as they see fit. Rome always has the last word. Rome requires the Jews to pay steep taxes. Moreover the tax is not for local improvements. It's simply money that goes to strengthening the power of Rome over more and more of the world. That explains why tax-collectors like Zacchaeus are such hated people in Jesus' day—because they work for the enemy.

Little does Judas realize that he is doing the same thing. No, he doesn't have a contract with Rome to collect taxes. He is, however, blind to the real enemy. He had his eyes too focused on worldly things and lost sight of God's kingdom. Judas does not see how his focus **on** defeating Rome is blinding him from seeing the real enemy in this world.

Satan lurks in the background. John tells us how Satan entered Judas on the night of the Passover,

Jn 13:2 The evening meal was being served, and the devil had already prompted Judas Iscariot, son of Simon, to betray Jesus.

Similarly, Luke tells us in his account of Judas' deal with the chief priests,

Lk 22:3 Then Satan entered Judas, called Iscariot, one of the Twelve.

It is Satan who enters Judas' heart. But Satan does not force Judas to act. He prompts him, said John. When I prompt you to do something, when I even strongly encourage it or try to give you an incentive to do so, you must still respond. That is true for Judas as well. But Judas fails to recognize that he is in a spiritual battle.

Do we?

Judas needs to recognize that the enemy is more spiritual than physical. The Jews had reasons to be concerned about the influence of Rome but they of all people should have known that the real enemy that needs to be conquered and booted out of our lives is Satan. We are in bondage to sin and Satan and that's the enemy Jesus has come to battle. Judas misses that, even though he sat at Jesus' feet for over three years.

You see, dear friends, it is dangerous to seek to use Christ for our own purposes. Equally dangerous is attempting to make him something we want him to be. Some people today follow Jesus for the wrong reason. They promise him their lives and faithful devotion in the expectation that he will release them from financial bondage. And sadly there are some today who feed that kind of thinking. Believe in Jesus and you'll be rich. Believe in Jesus and you'll never be sick again. Jesus is the magic wand that fixes all of our problems in this world. That's all we need him for.

How wrong we can be! How deceived. Judas' betrayal of Jesus is a powerful reminder to us of the horrific possibilities within the human heart—yes, our own hearts too. We should learn from this man who studied under Jesus Christ himself and yet betrayed him so easily. How close have you been to Jesus? What would it take for us to betray him? Would you do it for thirty pieces of silver? Can we put a price on our salvation? No we can't!

But Judas' betrayal must make us all look at our own hearts. Ask yourself, Do I undervalue Christ today? Would I sell him and in that sense sell my salvation for just 50 buck or 30 dirty pieces of silver. Or as someone else puts it, "Is Jesus over all your thoughts, or is he an afterthought?" Check your heart!

Check for places where you are particularly susceptible to temptation from the devil. Money was the weak spot in Judas' heart. He struggled with greed and the devil used it to tempt him and unless we confess our sin regularly, we become hardened in those areas. Our hearts form hard spots, like calluses on hands that have worked hard, and we become insensitive to the offence of our sin.

Oh, dear friends, don't be so naïve. No, don't be so stubborn in clinging to your sin. We must forsake our sin. Judas would not do that. He doesn't acknowledge his greed and ask the Lord for strength to deal with it. When we refuse to acknowledge our sin, we leave our hearts open to the devil as well.

Someone put it like this: "to belligerently claim one's independence [from Jesus] is to willfully lay raw meat before the roaring lion. Judas had a love of money that led him to dabble in the treasury, and it set into motion his diabolical destiny." Do we have places where we leave ourselves open to Satan as well? Henry Lockyer once wrote, "The forces of hell are all glad when men are willing to sell Christ for the sum of this world's pleasures and possessions. Lower the flag, compromise, become a good mixer, and semi-religious people will be ready to hail you as a 'good fellow.'" No, dear friends, don't do it. Ask yourself, Is my heart set on serving Jesus and honouring him as our Saviour and Lord? Think about it.

Another Chance

But as we close, take a look at how Jesus deals with Judas. You and I have betrayed Jesus numerous times in our lives both by what we have done and by what we have left undone. And the thing we need to see is Jesus' offer of grace—even to Judas. It is the same for us.

It should move us to tears of joy as well as sorrow for sin to watch our Lord deal with Judas in the last hours before his crucifixion. Before the Passover, Jesus washes even Judas' feet. At the Passover where Jesus says Judas will betray him, our Lord Jesus offers even Judas the cup and the bread of the Passover. This is a gesture reserved only for honored guests but Judas' heart remains ice-cold as Jesus shows him—and in the signs of the supper offers him—life instead of the pathway of death Judas has chosen.

In the passages we read, after Jesus agonizes in prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, Judas arrives and Jesus, knowing all that Judas has planned, accepts the kiss of betrayal. A kiss in that world is reserved as a greeting among friends but Jesus accepts it, for he is willing to die for sinners. So great is his love! Despite the betrayal, the Lord Jesus, according to Matthew 26:50, even addresses Judas as “*friend*.” That makes me think of John 15 where Jesus talked to all of the disciples around this same time and says.

Jn 15:15 I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you.

Even Judas has been taught the precious truths of God’s grace and salvation. He has heard the gospel from the lips of the Saviour himself. Jesus has invited him into the closest fellowship of friends on earth and invited him to set his own misguided dreams and hopes aside. Jesus does the same to everyone of us here. But Judas chooses his path and sticks to it with stubborn resolve and we read about what happened to him. He will not turn from his ways and acknowledge that Jesus alone is the pathway to God, the road to eternal Life.

I certainly hope no one here today will cling to their wrong-headedness. Please, congregation, hear the Lord Jesus calling you to be his friend today. Do not turn your heart from Jesus. Do not carry on in your sin. Do not deceive yourself into thinking you know better than Jesus.

Just listen to him call you. Let us turn from our sin and follow Jesus. Let us live for him with all of our hearts!