

JUDAS

12 Six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, where Lazarus lived, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. ²Here a dinner was given in Jesus' honor. Martha served, while Lazarus was among those reclining at the table with him. ³Then 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.

⁴But 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." ⁶He 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.

⁷"Leave her alone," Jesus replied. "It was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial. ⁸You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me."

The coin has always held its appeal for any man. Murders have been committed for it. Relationships have been broken over it. Integrity has been sacrificed as well as godliness, faithfulness, and truth. None of us likes to think of its power, but most of us, at one time or another, have been so entranced. And we've gone down a road we never thought we would.

I remember my parents, whom I loved and respected as people who showed me Jesus in just about every area of life – a fabulous team who always seemed to put faith above fortune and honesty above things. But when I was in college, I had a little accident with the car, and I learned that my parents, in order to save money on insurance, had not chosen to tell the insurance people that I was a regular driver of their cars. This, it turns out, is something that you are supposed to do – I guess required to do. But they had chosen to play the odds and save the cash. "What the insurance company doesn't know won't hurt em," I'm sure they reasoned. Needless to say, the insurance people were angry. They threatened not to cover the accident – to make us pay out of pocket because of the deception. But in the end, they did cover the cost – and then immediately dropped us from the policy.

And I remember feeling significantly disappointed in my parents because I got to see a situation where they yielded to a temptation and chose the currency over integrity – the dollar over honesty. It seemed so uncharacteristic of them, so contrary to how they had raised me. And I can think of so many other times when they displayed just the opposite. But in this case, they took a different path – they yielded to the temptation at that moment.

My brother, as many of you know, formerly served a congregation in Michigan. The former President of his congregation was one of his greatest supporters. He seemed to be a

godly man who attended Bible Studies and was active in just about everything else sponsored by the congregation. But underneath there was a secret. Unbeknownst to everyone, he was quietly and underhandedly stealing from the contributions and assets of the church. When finally discovered, it appears he took over \$300,000.

Can you imagine the inner turmoil he must have felt as he, week after week, fabricated reports, forged signatures, and raided accounts.

Judas, we learn from our text, was also mesmerized by the power of the coin. And, for him, it had gone beyond the extra little bit that he kept for himself as a treat. Judas, it seems, skimmed off the top of the disciples' treasury – he was, like the President of my brother's congregation, an embezzler, a thief. He kept the money that had been dedicated for the poor and for the subsistence of the group which traveled with the Lord.

I doubt he started out as a thief. Probably he, like many others, intended to be a worthy and honest steward of the funds. But then came that day when the choice gradually presented itself in His mind. "Judas, stop thinking about everybody else and start thinking about yourself. No one will miss the little you keep. There are no auditors, no IRS agents, no accountants. You are free and clear to do as you like."

And Judas liked Judas. And Judas liked the things he could obtain with his ill-gotten gains. And Judas slowly, probably reluctantly, listened to the voice. Next thing you know, he was listening to the voice more and more and more – even, it seems, creating situations where he could work his fingers and channel other people's generosity and hard work into his own pocket.

Look at our text. He declares, with feigned indignancy, "Why wasn't this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year's wages." But he knew in his heart of hearts that the money wasn't going to make it to the poor – or at least not all of it – because his own heart was in a different place.

True story. When the famous ship, the Queen Mary, was restored and relocated in Long Beach, California, to serve as a tourist attraction, cranes carefully lifted off the smokestacks to make the hull of the ship more accessible for the renovation. They carefully placed them on the dock and had the good intent to refurbish them with a brand new coat of paint. But as the stacks

were sitting there, all of a sudden, each of them collapsed and fell to the ground much like the twin towers did on the morning of September 11th. Turns out that the metal of these stacks had been eroding and eroding from the inside out, and that the only thing holding them together was layers and layers of paint that had been used regularly to keep the ship looking spiffy.

That's the way this sin was in the heart of Judas. Little by little, gradually but tenaciously, greed eroded the faith of Judas. At first, he justified his actions in his mind, then he probably moved toward ignoring the inconsistency and pretending it didn't exist, and finally, it so consumed him that it was all he could think about.

And where it leads him, finally, is the horrific betrayal on Wednesday of Holy Week, where, for 30 pieces of silver, he surrendered the Lord of Life into the hands of sinful men.

Do you see that pivotal moment – that first day when Judas succumbed to the Tempter's power and let his feelings and desires be his guide rather than the God of the Universe? Can you walk with him and understand the inner conflict that took him to that place?

I know I can. Because that's the way it is with any sin that keeps coming back in our lives – any temptation that keeps winning the victory – any inconsistency that regularly undermines our faith. We see the shiny coin before us, and it almost shouts out to us, "look at me. I'm here for you." And maybe it's not a coin. Maybe it's a woman, besides your wife or a man besides your husband. Maybe it's the anger you feel at a neighbor who hurt you. Maybe it's the juicy piece of gossip that you can share with your friend that will hurt someone else's reputation. Maybe it's the fun you can have at the ballgame instead of going to God's house. Maybe it's the answers to a test that lay unprotected on the desk of the smart girl in front of you, the rage you have at the guy on the road, the frustration you feel as your parents horn in to places in your life where they are not welcome.

Just this week I learned of a pastor who I had known as a student, who led a secret life and while standing up for truth in his preaching and teaching, was, in his secret world, trolling for someone to fulfill his fantasies.

You know what? Every day there's a coin out there, and every day there's a moment of decision. Which way will you go? Which way will you go?

The prophet Joel says, “Even now,” declares the LORD, “return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning.”¹³ Rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and he relents from sending calamity.¹⁴ Who knows? He may turn and have pity and leave behind a blessing.”

This is the season of Lent. Wouldn't you like to stand with Joel and lay it all down and declare that you will never ever do it again? Wouldn't you like to stand, at each pivotal moment, and find victory over the forces that tempt you?

So would I. I want to be like Peter, who wept bitterly and found restoration from Jesus for his denial. I want to be like Saul of Tarsus, who found new life in Christ. And yet, unfortunately, I know that Judas is right there too, and my coins or whatever other shining temptation that stalks me can easily be my undoing. Because I am sinful by nature. I am selfish, greedy, proud – angry, lustful, dishonest and self-centered. I cannot honestly say that I will win every pivotal moment or be a success when I am tempted. Because, you see, I know myself. And you know me too, because I am just like you.

And that's why Lent is not about us fasting and weeping and mourning. Or about us coming to church, praying our prayers, and singing our songs. It's about Him and what He did to save us from our pivotal failures

St. Paul declares in 2 Corinthians, “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” Do you see it? By ourselves our end is with Judas. The shiny coin, whatever it may be, will be our undoing. Our selfish, sinful nature will erode the stacks and leave us empty, lost, and hopeless. But Jesus became Judas on that cross. He became Peter and Paul and John and Andrew. He became Mary Magdalene, Martha, the woman caught in adultery, and the woman at the well. He became Philip Hillenbrand. He became you.

And then He took the punishment – the separation, the pain, the loneliness, the suffering – and He declared, “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.” And in that pivotal

moment when He closed His eyes in death, God accepted His sacrifice and made us One with Him.

And Paul declares: “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! ¹⁸ All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: ¹⁹ that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men’s sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. ²⁰ We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ’s behalf: Be reconciled to God.”

And we are free.

Each week, as we walk forward from this place having heard God’s absolution and maybe having received His true body and blood for our forgiveness, we walk forward with joy, not because it marks a pivotal moment of success for us or because we are choosing to stand with Him as newly faithful believers. No. We walk forward with joy because we know that without Him, we are Judas, and we will fall away. The coin will shine and we will go after it. But in Him and with Him and through Him a different light shines – because we are forgiven, because we are renewed, because we have eternity.

His pivotal moment won us away from our Judas and gave us His perfection. And so we say with St. Paul: “I am crucified with Christ, nevertheless, I live, yet not I but Christ lives in me. And the life I now live, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.” (Gal 2:20)