

THE JUDAS FACTOR
Sermon by Paul R. Powell
St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church, New Orleans
Sunday, November 3, 2013

I would love to know what ya'll thought when you read the title of my sermon today! Well, whatever you're thinking it may be right or may be wrong, but one thing for sure is that none of you are likely feeling sorry for Judas. However, from the time I was a kid, I have always felt a little sorry for the way Judas is portrayed. Yes, he betrayed Jesus for thirty pieces of silver and then committed suicide. But there's just got to be more to the story than that. Do you remember anything else from the biblical account? Did you remember that Judas was the money handler for the twelve apostles and that he had embezzled funds from his own friends? No, well that's part of the story, too. But even knowing all this, you gotta wonder if the story hasn't been distorted in these 2,000 years since.

I mean, Judas is so despised that nobody, but nobody would name their kid after him. It's almost as bad with our President. Can you imagine anyone naming their kid Barack Hussein Obama? Well, maybe Barack with his nickname of Barry if your last name was say Powell, or Rushing, or the like. Even the younger brother of Jesus who was also named Judas took on a shorter nickname of Jude, you know, the one who wrote the Epistle. Do you think that the Epistle of Judas would have ever made it into the canon of the New Testament, regardless of which Judas you were talking about? And it was only the name Judas that was shortened. Ever hear of I and II Pete, or I, II, and III Jack?

We think of Judas and we think betrayal, and we think betrayal and Judas comes to mind. No one then or now wanted to be identified with Judas. But who was he? Who was this Judas Iscariot? Well we don't really know all that much about him, but we do know that his father was Simon and that his surname Iscariot was probably a combination of the Hebrew words Ish and Kariot, which would then be translated, Man of Kariot. Despite being a thief and a betrayer, what would compel this man to sentence his closest friend to one of the most horrible deaths imaginable?

Several reasons have been suggested:

- 1) Being from Kaerrioth Judas would have been the only non-Galilean in the group. Maybe he was bitter over being the outsider, the odd ball.
- 2) Maybe he turned state's evidence to save his own skin.
- 3) Maybe he simply did it out of greed, for the money. He probably would have denied that, but you know what they say, when anyone says it's not about the money, it's about the money. Those thirty pieces of silver would have been worth close to \$10,000.00 today. Not a bad piece of change for a kiss on the cheek of his friend. Sometimes money talks so loud that it can't be ignored.

4) Or, maybe Judas came to hate Jesus because he couldn't hide his inner self from him. Others looked at Judas and saw a good man, but Jesus saw him for who he truly was and so he had to destroy the one who saw into the darkest corners of his heart.

5) It might be that Judas's last name wasn't a derivative of the Hebrew Ish Kariot as much as it was a form of the Greek word that meant "Dagger Bearer." The Dagger Bearers were a band of violent nationalists who were prepared to use every means available to them, including assassination, to free Palestine from Roman rule. Perhaps Judas had set his hopes on a Messiah who would deliver his people from these oppressors, and then in bitter disappointment he betrayed him.

6) Judas likely never intended for Jesus to die that day, but instead hoped to force his hand, so that when he was betrayed he would use his power to liberate Israel. If that was the case then what a tragedy Judas witnessed when he saw the plan fall apart.

Judas Iscariot: friend, confidant, disciple, treasurer, and now traitor. How it must have broken Jesus's heart when Judas stepped out of the crowd of those who came to arrest him and betrayed him with a kiss on the cheek.

The name Judas will go down in history being synonymous with betrayal. But the question we need to ask ourselves is this, "When Judas hung himself on that day what did he miss?" Imagine Judas's heart too when he goes into the Temple, throws the money on the floor, and goes out and hangs himself. But maybe this is what we have overlooked in the story: Judas hung himself even before Christ was sentenced. Even before Pilate finishes questioning Jesus, even before Barabas was released, even before Jesus was whipped and the crown of thorns pushed cruelly on his head, even before Jesus was nailed to the cross, Judas was dead! When Jesus looked down from the cross on those who had mocked him, and spit on him, slapped him, struck him, pulled his beard, beat him, jammed that crown of thorns deep into his forehead and nailed him to the cross; and when he looked at this mob and cried out "Father, forgive them for they don't know what they are doing," Judas was already dead by his own hand.

And Judas missed the forgiveness of Jesus Christ. We may be prone to believe that what Judas did was so horrible that he could never have been forgiven. Really? Aren't we betraying the very promise of Jesus to forgive all who seek forgiveness? Second Peter 3:9 tells us: "The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance." Did you catch that? The Lord does not want anyone to perish, not even Judas. Just as it was Judas's decision to betray Jesus, so it was Judas's choice to die unrepentant. To write off the possibility that Judas Iscariot COULD NOT obtain forgiveness for his actions is scary, because, you see, Christ's forgiveness is not dependent on our behavior, and it doesn't matter whether or not we deserve it. The forgiveness that each one of us needs is dependent on one thing and one thing only and that is the grace of God, the unmerited, undeserved, unearned love of God. And surely Judas needed undeserved love as much or more than any of us.

The saddest part of the story is that Judas came so close to forgiveness. Only three simple things are required in order to experience the forgiveness of God: (1) acknowledgment of our sin; (2) a sense of remorse for our sin; and (3) acceptance of the forgiveness offered to us, through faith. So, how close did Judas come to receiving this forgiveness? Matthew 27:4 tells us that Judas declared, "I have sinned, for I have betrayed an innocent man." There was the acknowledgment of his sin. And to his credit, Judas didn't try to justify himself or offer up excuses for what he had done. Nor did he try to rationalize his guilt. Instead he simply confessed: "I have sinned, for I have betrayed an innocent man." Matthew also tells us that when Judas realized he had betrayed Jesus, he was filled with remorse, and took the pieces of silver back to his pimps, the Jewish priests, who had hired him in the first place, but it was too late for his remorse to save him. Only the forgiving grace of Jesus could do that, but he just couldn't bring himself to ask for that forgiveness.

There are people everywhere who know the truth of Romans 3:23: "For all have sinned and come short of the glory of God." They know that, and they are remorseful, they feel really bad about their sin. But for some reason they just can't bring themselves to seek forgiveness from Christ. Whether it is pride or stubbornness or some other thing that is holding them back, it's a dangerous game to play, because you don't have to hang yourself to miss the forgiveness of Jesus Christ.

Three days after Jesus and Judas died, Jesus rose again, but Judas was still dead. When Jesus appeared to his disciples after his resurrection he made a statement that would never apply to Judas. In John 20:19 we read: "That evening, on the first day of the week, the disciples were meeting behind locked doors because they were afraid of the Jewish leaders. Suddenly, Jesus was standing there among them! "Peace be with you," he said. And so the second thing that Judas missed was peace. He seemed to have lived without it and now it would appear that he died without it. That peace that Christ promised his disciples in John 14:27 "I am leaving you with a gift—peace of mind and heart. And the peace I give isn't like the peace the world gives. So don't be troubled or afraid." Even then it was just hours until Judas' lips would touch his cheek in betrayal. You wonder if Judas was struggling with his decision even as Christ spoke about peace. You wonder if even then he was craving a peace that would never be his.

The world can never give you that peace and that is why suicide is the tenth greatest killer of Americans. In 2010, 38,364 suicides were reported. In that year, someone in our country died by suicide every 13.7 minutes. Suicide is also the third leading cause of death among young people 15-24. We look happy, and everyone may think we have the world by the tail, but we know deep down that we don't. We alone know whether or not we have that peace. It's easy to externalize peace, to put on a mask. Paul wrote in Philippians 4:7 " ... God's peace is far more wonderful than the human mind can understand and it will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus." If you have that peace then you know what I'm talking about, but have you ever tried to explain the depth of that peace to someone who hasn't experienced it? When most people talk about peace they think about what's going on in the Middle East. But the peace that the Bible talks about isn't just an absence of war. The Greek word for peace literally means "To set at one again" or more generally "atonement" in theological lingo. And it

deals primarily with broken relationships. When we are granted forgiveness through the grace of God then our relationship with God is restored. We are brought to the place where we belong. Judas missed that restoration. Though he was a man who was torn apart with conflict, the method that he chose to resolve the conflict really wasn't a viable option at all. Suicide doesn't solve problems, it simply creates them. It is very doubtful that Judas was able to say at his point of death the same words that Christ used, "Father, I entrust my spirit into your hands!"

Judas didn't damn himself at the point of betraying Christ. But he most certainly did when he refused to set the relationship straight. Had Judas sought the forgiveness that only Christ can give, then he most surely would have experienced the peace that only Christ can provide.

One thing that most commentators will agree on is that Judas was a dedicated nationalist. He was looking for an end to Roman tyranny and Jewish enslavement and he thought the answer lay in Jesus. The third thing that Judas missed was power. I'm sure that if you asked Judas what was the one thing that he craved his answer would have been power--power to make a difference, power to affect change, power to get things done that needed doing. His pathetic death would bring to mind a lot of images, but power wouldn't be one of them.

When Judas came to the end of his relatively short life, he felt so powerless to cope with the events which engulfed him, most of which were of his own doing, that he took what seemed to be the easiest way out. He was so caught up in his own problems that he missed the one thing that he craved the most. Because forty days after Judas died, Jesus made this promise to the remaining eleven disciples in Acts 1:8: "But when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, you will receive power and will tell people about me everywhere—in Jerusalem, throughout Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

Within ten days of that promise a power of unparalleled magnitude swept into the world. And Judas missed the one thing that had driven his life, power. The power that Christ gave to the disciples was a world changing power, a power that could only be described using the Greek word *dunamos*, the same root word from which we get words like dynamic, dynamo and dynamite.

The same power that Judas so desired but missed is available to every one of us. The church in general today doesn't lend itself to images of power, we've been relegated to the back burner of society. We're no longer a force to be reckoned with. But let's be truthful, is that because the power of the Holy Spirit is any less available or any less powerful today? Or is it because we fail to claim and exercise that power? Judas missed a lot--he missed the forgiveness of Christ, the peace of God and the power of the Holy Spirit, but you don't have to. All that Judas missed is available to you this morning. Christ's forgiveness is just as thorough today as it was 2000 years ago and you haven't done anything that is so vile that Jesus can't forgive you. The peace of God still surpasses all understanding in 2013 and the power of the Holy Spirit can still change our world as effectively as it changed the world of Peter and Paul. But just as Judas had to make the choice for himself, you will have to make the choice for yourself. If you have never

made the choice to receive God's forgiveness through faith in Jesus Christ, let today be the day.
AMEN.

Note: Portions of this sermon were drawn from Rev. Denn Guptil, pastor of Cornerstone Wesleyan Church in Canada.