

“THE TRAGIC LIFE OF JUDAS” **(Matthew 27:1-10)**

One of the challenges for parents, especially first-time parents, is coming up with a baby name. You want to do a good job because your baby is going to be stuck with their name the rest of their life. My older brother’s name is Ron, and I’ve always thought that my name wasn’t real creative... let’s just name him Don... Ron and Don. But then I discovered that the name Donald means “world ruler,” and I’ve liked the name ever since.

Like most parents, we bought a baby name book and spent a lot of time looking at the meaning of different names, as well as how they sound. There are several names that you’re not going to find in any baby book – names like Benedict or Adolph or Jezebel or Judas. Nobody wants to name their child after a notoriously bad person. Before Judas – Jesus’ betrayer – came along, Judas was a popular, noble name in Jewish culture. It meant “worthy of praise.” One such Judas was Judas Maccabeus, the heroic leader of the Maccabean revolution 150 years before Jesus was born. Many Jewish boys were named after him. Jesus had a brother named Judas, and two of Jesus’ disciples were named Judas – Judas, the son of James, and Judas Iscariot. Judas Iscariot took this noble, praise-worthy name and ruined it forever.

As we continue our study of Matthew this morning, we’re going to look at the tragic end of Judas’ life. As Matthew recounts the final hours of Jesus’ life, in between Jesus’ trials before the Jewish authorities and the Roman authorities, he interjects the dual stories of Peter and Judas – and his purpose seems to be to show a contrast between the way Peter handled his failure and the way Judas handles his. I want to start by walking through the final hours of Judas’ life in Matthew 27:1-10, and then go back and look at four critical lessons we can learn from his life.

Verses 1-2, “Early in the morning, all the chief priests and the elders of the people made their plans how to have Jesus executed. So they bound him, led him away and handed him over to Pilate the governor.” A few hours earlier, in the dead of night, Judas led Jewish and Roman soldiers to Jesus’ private place of solitude in Gethsemane. Judas kissed Jesus on the cheek and the soldiers arrested Jesus and took Him to the palace of Annas, the former high priest who was seen as the real power in Jewish politics.

The goal is this hearing was to trump up a charge against Jesus – they really didn’t have one – they just want Him gone. But any case involving capital punishment must go through the Roman authorities, so they must find some charge that will convince Rome to go along with their desire to kill Jesus. Jesus plays coy with Annas, and Annas then sends Jesus to the current high priest – His son-in-law Caiaphas.

Caiaphas asks Jesus straight up, “Are you the Messiah, the Son of God?” Jesus says, “Yes, and you will see me sitting at the right hand of God and coming in the clouds of heaven to judge the earth.” With that, the Sanhedrin – the seventy-member ruling council condemns Jesus to die, and now in chapter 27, at daybreak, they take Jesus to the Roman governor Pilate. Next week we will look at Jesus trial before Pilate. But for now, Matthew turns his attention to Judas.

Verses 3-4a, “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. ‘I have sinned,’ he said, ‘for I have betrayed innocent blood.’”

Judas is such a fascinating character – he is certainly a villain, but here he comes across as sincerely sorry and remorseful for what he’s done. Perhaps he didn’t think the Jewish authorities would actually condemn Jesus to death, or maybe he thought that being arrested would inspire Jesus to act and be the political Messiah Judas wanted Him to be. We don’t really know, but we do know that he is overcome with guilt and remorse.

When He hears that Jesus is condemned to death, he returns the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and elders. He says, “You take it. I have sinned and have betrayed innocent blood.” The guilt of all his actions in the previous hours comes reigning down on him, and he seems truly sorry. He knows deep in his heart that Jesus is an innocent man who has done nothing worthy of death, and he’s remorseful. What does that mean? Is he, like Peter, ready to repent of what He’s done and come back to Jesus? Hold that question and we’ll come back to it later.

Verses 4b-5, “What is that to us?” they replied. “That’s your responsibility.” So Judas threw the money into the temple and left. Then he went away and hanged himself. You’d think that Judas’ regret and remorse might awaken the consciences of the Sanhedrin – to make them stop and consider their actions towards Jesus. As the Supreme Court of Israel their job is to seek justice and make sure innocent people are not wrongly condemned. But they’re unmoved and say, “What you did is what you did – if you feel bad about it, that’s on you.”

Judas then takes the blood money – the thirty pieces of silver – and throws it onto the temple floor as a statement of His remorse. Then, very simply, Matthew says “Judas went away and hanged himself.” He goes out and finds a tree hanging over a precipice, makes a noose, puts it around his neck and jumps. Acts 1 says that Judas died by falling headlong and his body burst open and his intestines spilled out. Try not to visualize that. Well, which is it? Did Judas die by hanging or by falling? The simple answer is both. Somewhere in the process of hanging himself over this precipice, the rope breaks and he falls, and upon impact his body is split open.

The way Judas dies is poetic in that, according to Jewish law in Deuteronomy 19, the person who lies and causes an innocent person to be punished, they must suffer the same punishment. Jesus was betrayed by Judas and died on a tree. Judas dies the same way – on a tree. Judas decided to punish himself and die for his sins rather than to trust Christ to pay for his sins. It is truly tragic.

Matthew continues in verse 6-10 to say, 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.” So they decided to use the money to buy the potter’s field as a burial place for foreigners. That is why it has been called the Field of Blood to this day. 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, and they used them to buy the potter’s field, as the Lord commanded me.”

The religious leaders are really something. They are sticklers when it comes to the law and say, “This money is tainted – it’s blood money – and we won’t defile the temple by putting it in the treasury,” but they have no problem whatsoever in breaking law after law to have Jesus condemned. It’s like being upset about a minor infraction like jaywalking, but overlooking murder. They are world-class hypocrites.

They take the blood money and, in an act of charity, buy a field to use as a cemetery for strangers and those who could not afford their own burial. Even today we have cemeteries that are called “potters graves,” where unidentified bodies or the poor are buried – and these cemeteries are named after the field bought by the chief priests. The land had originally been used as a place where potters went to get their clay, but after all the clay was scraped off and down to bare rock, the property was put up for sale.

The Jews considered graveyards to be unclean, so the leaders of the Sanhedrin use the unclean money to buy an unclean place. Neither Judas or the leaders want anything to do with this blood money. They want to get rid of it as fast as they can. The field they purchased came to be called the “field of blood,” and became a lasting symbol of condemning an innocent man to death.

Judas’ life was truly a tragedy – Judas took his privileged position as one of the twelve disciples chosen by Jesus and threw it all away for thirty pieces of silver, which he didn’t even keep. This raises several questions: What went wrong? What led up to Judas’ decisions? Was he truly sorry for what he did? Will we see Judas in heaven? I want to share with you four really important things we can learn from Judas’ life that will prevent us from a similar tragedy.

The first lesson is **how you start is no guarantee of how you will finish**. Judas started off great. We don’t know how he came into contact with Jesus, but when Jesus called him to be one of the twelve disciples, Judas eagerly responded. He saw something in Jesus that resonated in him, and like the rest of the disciples, he left everything to follow Jesus. Not only was a committed follower of Jesus, he was actively involved in ministry. He went out with the other twelve and preached the gospel and healed people and cast demons. He was all in. Yet three years later he betrayed Jesus and took his own life.

There are many others in the Bible that started off well, but finished badly. Noah was a righteous man whom God used to deliver his family from the flood, but he ended up a drunken man who was cursed by his son. David stumbled badly at the midpoint of his life and suffered painful consequences the rest of his life. Solomon started out as the wisest man on earth, but ended up lamenting life. I know, and I know you can think of, Christian leaders and pastors who had great ministries and were used of the Lord, but did not finish well.

Others, like Judas started well but never finished – they were never truly saved. King Saul started his kingship committed to God, but ended his life by falling on his own sword. Paul mentions one of his missionary teammates named Demas who deserted him because he loved the world. In the past few years, we’ve seen some prominent Christians – including pastors and worship leaders – who have left the faith and say they no longer believe. What do we make of all this?

It’s possible for a person like Judas to begin following Jesus with zeal and enthusiasm, but flame out and show that they were never truly saved in the first place. The author of Hebrews says, “*Let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us*” (12:1b). Jesus never promised that the Christian life would be easy. It’s a race – not a sprint, but a long marathon with lots of obstacles and pain. Satan is out to get you and trip you up, wear you out, and cause you to crawl across the finish line or not finish at all. He’s going to try to take you out through sin, he’s going to try to take you out through doubt, and he’ll try to take you out through discouragement.

That's why it's so important to keep your heart in tune with the Lord – to maintain a real, authentic, intimate relationship where you abide in Him and He abides in you. A big part of the Christian life is endurance. The Christian race is a marathon, and knowing this helps prepare for the long haul, and keep running no matter what temptations or distractions come our way – we just keep running, putting on foot in front of the other, and we don't give up.

The second lesson we learn from Judas' life is that **you can appear to be a Christian without being a Christian**. If you were to line up the twelve disciples, and pick out which one would betray Jesus, you would not have any idea who it was. Judas looked and acted just like the other twelve. He was a well-respected, trusted member of the group – so much so that they made him the group treasurer – a role that required immense trust.

Judas walked with Jesus for over three years, and got to see the greatest life ever lived up close and personal. You can't couldn't have a better environment for forming faith than Judas had. He got to see miracle after miracle, He was with Jesus when He fed the 5,000 and helped distribute the food, He was there when Jesus calmed the storm and raise Lazarus from the dead. He also had a front-row seat to all of Jesus' teachings. He heard the Sermon on the Mount, he heard the parables, and he heard Jesus prophesy about the future. Yet being surrounded with every possible spiritual advantage, Judas was never truly saved. We know that because Jesus said in John 17 that none of His disciples has been lost expect the one doomed to destruction. Judas was never a true believer.

Jesus often stressed that the truly converted are few... “Broad is the road that leads to destruction, and narrow is the road that leads to life.” According to the latest statistics, there are 2.2 billion people worldwide that claim to be Christians – a solid third of the world's population. In the United States a whopping 70% claim to be Christians. In His earthly ministry, Jesus encountered many “would-be” disciples – those who followed Him and appeared to be genuine disciples, but when Jesus called for them to commit their lives to Him, they fell away. They were never converted. In one of His parables Jesus talked about the wheat growing alongside the tares. They look exactly the same, and you won't be able to tell the difference until they are harvested.

A true danger in the church today is that there are some who come to church, they do church things, they may get baptized – and from all outward appearances they seem to be genuine Christians. But they're not. How can you tell? Well, like the wheat and the tares, many times you can't tell. That's why 2 Corinthians 13:5 calls on every person to “Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves.”

I listened to a podcast by Sean McDowell, the son of Josh McDowell, and he talked about his interactions with those who have left the faith, and he asks each of them to tell him about how they came to faith in the first place. Most said they became a Christian because it felt good or because their friends were Christians or their parents were Christians or because they hit a rough patch in their life and Jesus helped them. Then he asks them, “Was there ever a time when you were struck with a deep awareness of your sin and cried out to God for salvation?” No one he talked to had experienced this.

There are many people who come to church, who have been baptized, and know all the Christian lingo, but are not truly saved. They've never crossed from darkness into light. None of the other disciples had any idea what was going on in Judas' heart. He was one of them. When Jesus said, “One of you will betray me,” no one looked at Judas. He appeared to be the real deal.

To be truly converted, Jesus says, you must be “born again.” Just as we all are born physically, we must be born again spiritually. True Christians are born again – they become new creations in Christ. Just like a newborn baby shows signs of physical life, a new born believer shows signs of spiritual life. They’re changed people. Jesus said, “By their fruits you will know them.” They love God and hate sin. They forgive. They serve God and tell others about Him. And most importantly, they love Jesus and have a daily, intimate relationship with Him. They talk to Jesus and are friends with Jesus. There is warmth and affection for Jesus. And they read God’s Word not as a textbook, but as a love letter – soaking in all that God has to tell them. Judas never had this kind of relationship with Jesus, and though he appeared to be saved, he never truly was.

A third lesson we learn from Judas is that **betraying Christ never happens suddenly, but gradually**. One of the most notable Christian leaders to fall recently is Ravi Zacharias, the renowned Christian apologist who traveled the world convincing people of the claims of Christ. Ravi died last May, and after his death it was discovered that he was leading a double life and guilty of really ugly sins. Josh McDowell, a fellow apologist who knew Ravi Zacharias, was asked if he thought Ravi was a fraud from the very beginning of his ministry, or if he fell into sin over time. McDowell said that no one – or very few – start out as frauds – but they slowly drift into sin and compromise. I think he’s right.

I don’t think Judas had intentionally set out to betray Jesus, but over time the spiritual cracks in his life began to show. One was his love of money. Unbeknownst to the other disciples, he had been taking money from the group money box. He was a thief. When he piously said that the money Mary spent on perfume to anoint Jesus would be better used to give to the poor, it was not because he cared about the poor, it was because he could have more money to steal.

Over time Judas’ pride and selfishness also surfaced. He not only loved money, he loved power. One of the reasons he so eagerly followed Jesus in the first place was because he thought Jesus was going to take the land of Israel back from Rome and rule over a glorious kingdom – and when He did, Judas would be right there ruling and reigning alongside Him – perhaps as Secretary of the Treasury. When Jesus didn’t live up to his expectations, his true motivations were exposed and he turned on Jesus.

Judas reminds us that it’s the little things – the choices and decisions over a lifetime that determine what we become. It may start with taking a little money here or there, but it grows. It may be dissatisfaction with God for what He is or isn’t doing. Many people start the Christian life with good intentions – they’re sincere about their faith – but like the frog in the kettle that slowly boils to death, they don’t pay attention to their heart. They slowly drift. They get caught up in sin, they start to doubt, they start believing wrong thing, and before you know it, they betray the Lord and leave the faith.

The sad thing is that no one knew what was going on in Judas’ heart. No one could help him because he was leading a secret, double-life. An important part of the Christian life is having authentic relationships with other brothers and sisters in the Christian community – so that you work through your doubts and struggles together – so that someone else knows your “stuff” and help keep you grounded in your faith

The fourth lesson we learn from Judas’ life is that **true remorse leads to repentance and change**. Judas knew that God forgives any and every sin – he knew the story of the prodigal son and how God will graciously receive back anyone who truly repents. Judas blew it, big time. So did Peter. And both of them were overwhelmed with guilt for what they had done. Both of them wept. Both wanted relief from their guilt.

Peter repents. A few days after Jesus' resurrection, Peter meets with the Lord in Galilee and there he tenderly forgives and restores Peter. After this, we see a different Peter. Never again did he cower in fear and deny the Lord – he bravely served his Savior the rest of his life up until the day he was martyred.

Judas appears to repent as well. He says, "I have sinned." But then he goes out and hangs himself. Rather than take his guilt to Jesus and run to Him for forgiveness, Judas punishes himself. We've all sinned against God – we've rebelled against Him – and deserve to be punished. The unique message of Christianity is that Jesus offers to take the guilt of our sin upon Himself and pay for it on the cross.

2 Corinthians 7:10 says, "Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death." It's possible to feel sorry, to have tears and remorse and to say, "I have sinned," but not repent. The Bible calls this "worldly sorrow." Worldly sorrow is how you feel when you get a speeding ticket. You feel sorry, not for breaking the speed limit, but for getting caught. Worldly sorrow is feeling bad for getting caught, and if not for getting caught you would keep on doing it.

Godly sorrow brings repentance. Repentance is actively turning away from sin and turning to God. It's not so much saying, "I'll do better next time Lord, I'll really try harder," it's saying, "Lord God, I'm a sinner and I need your help to change." David said, "A broken and contrite heart you will not despise." Godly sorrow leads to salvation and genuine relief from a guilty conscience.

Judas is one of six people in the Bible who said, "I have sinned," but did not repent or change. He wanted relief more than forgiveness. He regretted what he did, but he fell short of repentance, and it led to his death.

His story is recorded in the Bible as both a warning and an encouragement. Judas warns us that starting well is no guarantee of finishing well. He warns us that you can appear to be a Christian but not be genuinely converted. His life warns us to pay attention to what's going on in our hearts and not drift away from the Lord. And his tragic end warns us that remorse without repentance does not lead to forgiveness.

The encouragement of his story is that right here, right now, you can change the course and direction of your life.

- If you've veered off course and are not finishing well, God is calling you to endure and finish the race.
- If you've been drifting away from the Lord – if you've betrayed Him, right now you can say, "Lord, I'm sorry. I repent. Forgive me, help me. Restore me."
- If you've never been truly converted – and today you feel a conviction from God that you're a sinner in need of His forgiveness, you can pray to be born again right now.