



# “When Priests Become Villains”

a sermon by

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This is a hard text to say “thanks be to God” after. It is a hard text to ascribe as “The word of the Lord”, as a matter of fact most of us probably wish that it wasn’t the word of the Lord, and there is no point in beating around the bush concerning that fact. It’s a dark story, one that we don’t really know what to do with, and consequently we usually don’t do anything.

It’s an ugly story, full of deceit, hardness of heart, betrayal, guilt, and shame. We like stories that warm the heart, that rouse gentle tears, and inspire fond memories – but this one – this one doesn’t fit the mold. In fact it darkens the mind and it unsettles the spirit.

For starters, all of us know what it is like to be betrayed, maybe not unto death, but we have all at some point or another felt a knife prick at our back and been surprised by its bearer. We have all felt abandoned, left out to dry, by someone that we trusted and expected more from. So at a certain level this account is uncomfortable, because we can all to some degree or another, relate to a betrayed Jesus.

Even harder still is the fact that all of us have also been the betrayer. Each one of us, if we are truly honest with ourselves, has failed to love somebody as deeply as they have loved us. Each one of us has failed to live up to the expectations of someone who had our best interest in mind and at heart. All of us have shattered someone in a way that we were later ashamed of. If you haven’t – then I want to meet you because I have something to learn from you.

Furthermore, all of us have at one time or another faced the callous indifference of a crowd and in that indifference have been shamed or shoved aside. All of us have at one time or another been repentant for a wrong committed and had our apology not taken seriously or thrown back in our face. All of us have experienced the sting of ungrace.

Which is to say that this story is difficult, not only because it is dark and ends in death, but it is difficult because it touches upon a wide range of emotions that all of us have felt at one time or another, but rarely like to talk about.

But this story is also an important story, and as such, it demands that from time to time we take notice of it. It is important because it is revealing – it tells us something about human nature and the world we live in. However, more significantly, this story is important because it bears a warning – a warning of tremendous peril – peril that I believe lies in wait for all of us, desiring to devour those who drop their guard and do not exercise due diligence.

Typically throughout Church History, tradition has vilified everyone within this story with the exception of Jesus. This has served to make a dark and messy tale as clean and as sanitized as we could possibly make it. And I understand that desire. But my conscience will not let me get away with it. I believe this story was meant to be dark and messy and we must somehow learn to live with that.

Our story begins in the early hours of dawn. Having been betrayed with a kiss, Jesus had been brought in the night before. His disciples have scattered – all except Peter and Judas. Peter had followed the mercenary mob from a distance, trying to appear the casual observer. Wanting desperately to remain close to Jesus, but not wanting to be too closely associated with Jesus in that particular hour, for fear of what it might cost him.

And then there was Judas. Judas possibly never left the side of Jesus and had nothing to fear from the mob – largely because it was his kiss that placed Jesus in shackles. Chances are, while Peter hung out by the shadows hoping to grasp onto some word, some news of the proceedings, Judas most likely knew every word, Judas most likely had a front row seat.

It was against the Jewish law to condemn a person at night. So all night, Jesus was questioned before the senior pastors and lay leaders of Israel, and when morning came – the gavel fell and the death sentence was handed down.

This fate was not a surprise to Jesus, after all, he had predicted it, in fact, he had come to earth to face it; but it apparently was a surprise to Judas. For the text tells us that when Judas saw that Jesus was condemned he was seized with remorse.

Here there appears to be a prisoner exchange. Jesus was the one bound, but also innocent and free of guilt. Judas however was wrought and shackled with guilt. The Gospels give us the ironic sense that while Jesus was the prisoner, he was also the one subtly manipulating the situation and cosmically calling the shots.

I imagine that it was Jesus alone holding back the heavenly hosts from sweeping to the earth to destroy the treacherous lot. And caught in the middle of it all, this whole cosmic battle between sin and freedom, between good and evil, was poor little Judas – whom both Luke and John believed was possessed and moved by Satan to commit his act of treachery.

Having been abandoned by Satan however, Judas is left with the startling realization of the consequences of his betrayal, and is overwhelmed by guilt. We don't like to talk about guilt. We don't like guilt at all, in fact most of us resent it. But I believe it was created by God and serves a Godly purpose. Like a fever, it alerts us to a deeper internal problem. And here we see the healthy purpose of guilt, as it alerted Judas to the fact that he had made an error, he had gone astray.

Most of us who have read the Bible are at least familiar with the term leprosy. Leprosy is a contagious skin disease that still exists today and is now known as Hansen's disease. What makes Hansen's disease so dangerous is that it attacks the nerve endings of the body so that one cannot feel any sensation within the extremities. With the nerve endings gone, you cannot feel hot or cold, you cannot feel the gentle caress of a touch, or the sharp pain of stubbing your toe; you can even step on a nail and not know it.

In such extreme cases, because the nerve endings have been destroyed, there is no pain to alert the body of danger, and infection can set in without one recognizing it. Guilt is the nerve ending of the soul. It tells us when we are on the verge of being lost.

In the case of Judas, guilt worked as it was designed and intended. It seized him with remorse, which led him to repentance. Now I know that most of us don't associate Judas with repentance. We associate him with suicide. But from Judas in this passage we get a perfect model of repentance.

Biblically speaking, we believe there are three conditions necessary for authentic repentance and we see all of them here in Judas. First off, he had contrition – he recognized his sin, felt remorse for it, and sought to change his ways. Secondly, he gave confession – he went to those whom the law of God told him to go and admitted that he had sinned. Thirdly, he tried to make satisfaction – he tried to bear a positive witness to the innocent blood of Jesus and return his ill-gotten money.

Typically throughout history, the church has been uncomfortable accepting the repentance of Judas as true repentance – largely because the church is uncomfortable with his suicide at the end of the story.

However, you cannot get away from the fact that even his confession is a model of genuine confession. Notice that Judas does not trivialize his behavior, he simply says – I have sinned. Notice that he does not blame others, he does not say “you made me do it” – he simply says – I have sinned. And notice that he honors the one he sinned against by declaring him innocent blood. As Dale Bruner points out – “what more is required in a confession than taking responsibility and honoring Jesus?”<sup>1</sup>

What Judas lacks, is an assurance of pardon, and without an assurance of pardon – guilt became shame, and shame led to despair. It was the function of the high priests according to Leviticus law, to receive the sacrifices and offerings of the people. They were to hear confession and once the proper sacrifice and restitution had been made, they were to mediate God's acceptance of offender.

Unfortunately for Judas, his sacrifice, namely his broken and contrite heart – which the psalmist tells us is an acceptable sacrifice to God, hits upon fallow ground because those designed by God to administer grace, were themselves in a position of guilt before God.

And Leviticus Law also tells us that before a priest could offer atonement to a person like Judas, they were to first atone for their own sins. But being guilty themselves of treachery, the senior pastors of Israel were incapable of fulfilling their Godly commission.

I find that I have two emotional reactions to this text. The first one is deep grief over Judas. I believe that God cried twice over Judas. First, when he betrayed Jesus with

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<sup>1</sup> Dale Bruner, *Commentary on Matthew*, Vol. II, p. 1020.

a friend's kiss, and second, when his repentant heart went unheard. The second reaction is to the arrogance shown here by the senior pastors and lay leaders of Israel. Their arrogance makes me want to put my fist through a wall.

The chief priests smugly respond to the repentance of Judas by saying, "What does that have to do with us – you deal with it?" Listen to Dale Bruner's take on the chief priests response. "'What does that have to do with us?' 'Everything in the world,' Judas could have replied. 'First, you have the power here – reconvene the court; second, let me give fresh testimony; third, let me give a sin-offering; fourth, judge me according to my offense; finally, give me a chance.' The ministers of God are in the temple of God to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with God (Micah 6:8). 'What does that have to do with us?' denies justice to Jesus, mercy to Judas, and any kind of responsibility before God."<sup>2</sup>

Furthermore, "you handle it" is "exactly what the despairing sinner does not need to hear. This free-will, it-is-all-up-to-you, your-responsibility teaching is one of the most irresponsible teachings in the church of God ... The people of God must be taught that without God and miraculous divine help, weak and sinful human beings simply cannot handle their sin."<sup>3</sup>

The Romans, as many of you know, had several gruesome practices for enforcing corporate punishment. One of those methods that is not widely known was the practice of tying a dead man face-to-face, hand to hand, and foot to foot, with a captive. The Romans would then leave the dead body attached to their prisoner until decay set in and destroyed the life of the living victim. Virgil describes the effects of this cruel punishment when he says, "the living and the dead at his command were coupled face to face and hand to hand, till choked with stench, in loathed embraces tied, the lingering wretches pined away and died."<sup>4</sup>

By refusing to give grace to Judas, the religious leaders of Israel, essentially tied the dead body of his friend and Lord Jesus Christ to his already guilt-laden frame, and unable to live with the shame – Judas hung himself on a tree. I cannot think of anything more tragic. Judas, was who Jesus went to the cross to save, but due to graceless religion, the message to him was lost.

How many people, then and since, have suffered due to graceless religion? How many people have been driven to despair when priest failed to be mediators of grace, when churches and their representatives failed to properly speak for God or live into the purpose for which they were created and called? How many people have taken their own life because we have failed to head the warning that this chapter provides?

This is a hard word, but I believe that the blood of Judas rests squarely upon the shoulders of the priests. They knew they were in the wrong. They knew that they had

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<sup>2</sup> Dale Bruner, *Commentary on Matthew*, Vol. II, p. 1021.

<sup>3</sup> Dale Bruner, *Commentary on Matthew*, Vol. II, p. 1022.

<sup>4</sup> *Leadership*, 88, p. 36.

used Judas; the fact that they refused to enter the blood money back into the treasury is proof of that. Their treachery was a well-thought-out affair that served their selfishness. It was well justified in their mind. So much so that they failed to recognize the danger of their own position.

And how often are we in a similar position? Two months ago, I pulled into a gas station to fill up my tank. I was on East Blvd, somewhat in a hurry, and had been hit up several times that day by the homeless for one type of assistance or another. To be quite frank, it had been a long day, I was running late to an evening meeting, and I was tired.

I pulled into the gas station, got out of my Jeep and began to pump my gas, when a homeless man approached me and asked if he could wash my windows. Without a thought, I said no. At my rejection – I witnessed a dramatic change upon the face of the man in front of me.

Shame overcame him, his shoulders immediately dropped, and without a word he turned on his heel and walked away broken. The look of shame on that man's face, nailed me to a wall. He hadn't asked me for money. He didn't want a handout. He was in obvious need, so he had lowered himself to beg a wealthy young man for a menial task, a task that, while menial, would allow him to gain pennies worth of an income, but still retain his dignity.

And with my hardened heart, I gave him a flippant answer, and robbed him of the one thing he was desperately trying to keep. His shame became my guilt, and I found myself running down the street, with tears streaming down my face, calling after him, begging him to come back.

Whether we like it or not, when we bear the name of Christ, we are all priests. If you are here today, then it says something of the fervency of your faith, and that faith comes with a responsibility. A responsibility to be bearers and mediators of grace. And when we fail to take that role seriously, when we fail to be the priests that God has called us to be, then I believe we become villains. And the consequences of our actions – until repented of, rest squarely upon our shoulders.

Grace cost God a terrible price and we must not treat it cheaply. I believe we will give an accounting for the Judas's of our lives. And something tells me that when it comes to rejecting those whom God has worked and sacrificed so much to restore, His patience with us privileged may be thin. I believe that in such cases eternity might just be on the line and so we must tread carefully.

Now does that mean that we will always be right? Obviously no. We will fail. We will feel guilt. And grace does abound. But that being said, it is a warning not to take our priestly roles lightly.

There are two accounts of death in Matthew 27. The first is the death of Judas and the second is that of Jesus. I do not believe that is by accident. The first death was

considered an unclean one and it serves for us to be a warning – a warning not to forget the death of the second – a death which cleanses the world of guilt and a death that I believe cries to this day over the plight of Judas – not as villain, but as victim.