

## Repent: Turn to Jesus; Do Not Turn Away –Matthew 27:1-5

Parents understand that raising children can be a risky business where you're not guaranteed the results you expect. They pray for their children, yet they are not always the little angelic answers they hoped for. Parents try to raise them in the way of the Lord, yet sometimes their children seem downright eager to forsake the way of the Lord. Parents want them to know that they are dearly loved children of the heavenly Father, yet sometimes children crave the love of their earthly peers far more. Parents love their children and that love often means pain.

As a pastor who's been in the ministry for 8 months or so, I too have come to see the ministry is sometimes a risky business. We mine the Word for hours to find precious gems of spiritual goodness. We step into the pulpit to preach with all our might and passion . . . and some people fall asleep in the pews! I've sat at my desk and tried to counsel members through sinful situations. And the response I sometimes hear? *"I know you have to say that because you work for the church . . ."* As a church body do a great job at training our youth in the faith. We have Sunday School and confirmation classes, our grade school in Marana, and high schools all over the country! But sadly statistics tell us that one-quarter to one-third of this year's confirmands will not be attending church by Labor Day. It hurts a pastor's heart when it becomes obvious that some are in no great hurry to get to heaven! The rebellion of those we love and care for is a painful reminder that Eden is in the rearview mirror and it's still a long way to heaven!

Each of us has felt the pain of a loved one who has turned away from Jesus to walk on a different spiritual path. How much pain, then, did Jesus feel that night in the Garden of Gethsemane when his friend became his foe and a kiss meant death?

Because you see, Jesus and Judas were more than friends. They shared a spiritual fellowship since Judas was one of the 12 apostles. Along with the other 11, he sat at Jesus' feet learning God's Word and asking Jesus questions. But have you ever pictured this? Judas preaching the Word, cleansing lepers, healing the sick, driving out demons, and even raising the dead? This is what Jesus commissioned the apostles to do in Matthew chapter 10 and it's only logical to conclude that Judas did these too.

But when we think of Judas, we don't picture him as the willing apostle. We picture as a man on a covert mission in Gethsemane. Listen to these words from Matthew chapter 26: **"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. Now the betrayer had arranged a signal with them: 'The one I kiss is the man; arrest him.' Going at once to Jesus, Judas said, 'Greetings, Rabbi!' and kissed him. Jesus replied, 'Do what you came for, Friend' "** (Mt 26:47-50).

Judas went from raising the dead to betraying the Lord of life. How did that happen? Judas didn't wake up one morning and say, *"Today's the day I'm going to betray the Son of God."* No, Satan began to work on Judas' heart years before and in much more subtle ways. Because that's how Satan works. He sticks his snake's head through a crack in our hearts quickly followed by the rest of him and plenty of sin as well to bring down what God has built up inside of us.

How did Satan stick his head into Judas' sinful heart? The Bible sums it up in one word: *greed*. St. Paul wrote to St. Timothy that **"the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs"** (1 Ti 6:10). Judas is perhaps the ultimate poster boy of one who loved money too much. As a result, he ended up wandering away from the faith and turning away from Jesus. It did not end well for him!

The real tragedy, of course, is that Judas had been warned. He had followed Jesus for 3 years as one of the apostles. He knew that his treasure was in heaven and that no moth or rust would ever be able to knock the shine off (Mt 6:19,20). He had been warned that a man could not serve both God and money (Mt 6:24). He had been taught the parable of the sower and the seed and learned how the deceitfulness of wealth can choke the Word right out of someone's heart (Mt 13:22). Judas may even have chuckled a bit when Jesus described a camel being crammed through the eye of a needle which is easier to do than for a rich man to enter heaven (Mk 10:25). In spite of everything that Jesus taught Judas about a man's money and a man's heart, Judas *turned away from* Jesus and slowly, steadily *turned toward* the shine of silver and the glitter of gold.

It was probably innocent enough at first—sin always is. Judas was in charge of the money bag and keeping the disciples' accounts in good order. Perhaps the trouble began when he wrote a personal loan. He would pay it back. Someday . . . Perhaps . . . We know for certain that people of financial means supported Jesus' ministry. Cash was constantly crossing Judas' hands. Opportunity for lining his pockets came easy and often. Eventually, Judas' greed surfaced when Mary, the sister of Martha, gave Jesus a most amazing gift: a bottle of precious perfume poured upon Jesus' feet. Judas protested saying that they should have sold the perfume and give the money to the poor! But as St. John tells us with inspired 20/20 hindsight, it wasn't charity that was on Judas' mind. It was himself. St. John tells us **"[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"** (Jn 12:6).

And then came the ultimate opportunity for easy money: because Judas was friends with Jesus, he was in contact with Christ's enemies. Rich, powerful enemies who would pay cold cash for just a kiss in the darkness. Note how deliberate Judas' sins now become: He *discussed* this "business transaction" with the religious leaders. He *watched* for an opportunity to betray Jesus. He *led* the detachment of soldiers to the Garden of Gethsemane while Jesus was in prayer. They even had a *pre-arranged signal* to show who it was the soldiers were going to arrest—a kiss on the cheek as was common in their culture.

And Judas got his money alright! All 30 pieces of silver, the price of common slave. Oh, but how the silver glistened in the torchlight! It felt so very cool and solid in his hand. And he paid dearly for those 30 pieces of silver: **"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.' '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."** Judas got his money, but forfeited his soul. He suffers penniless in hell to this very night!

*“Poor Judas!”* No. How about instead, *“God help us!”* Scripture doesn’t tell us Judas’ story so that we can pity a dead man but so that we can avoid Judas’ dead end. St. Paul’s reminds us: **“So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don’t fall!”** (1 Co 10:12). Scripture is littered with examples and hell is bursting with people who once were faithful Christians. But they had turned away from Jesus. They turned away for foreign wives or another man’s wife; turned away for greed and money; turned away because they trusted another gospel, which was really no gospel at all; and turned away because they loved sexual immorality more than the bride of Christ. The sad story of Judas demonstrates a dreadful fact: for some, the road to hell leads straight through the doors of the church.

Perhaps you say to yourself *“I would NEVER fall away from Jesus!”* I pray that’s so. Seriously, I pray that you all continue to turn towards God in his Word as you are right now! But I have a feeling that when Judas was still a faithful apostle, he thought he would never turn away. Sure we have never stolen a widow’s offering money, but then again, we don’t always like hearing what the Bible says about money. We love to hear God’s Word, but then again, so did everyone who has been dropped from church membership for consistently neglecting the Word and sacrament. I would never think of betraying Jesus, but then again, how many people outside the doors of church even know that I’m a Christian? I won’t betray him; I’ll just keep him secret! Then there is good old-fashioned greed, the sin of Judas. Society calls the relentless quest for earthly treasures *“keeping up with the Joneses.”* I wonder, however, is it really the Joneses we are keeping up with—or perhaps the Judases?

Greed, unconfessed sin, premeditated sin, putting Jesus on a shelf, prioritizing the world, call it what you will. But it all leads to one thing – a toxic brew that turns us around 180 degrees away from our Savior to our sin, from our God to our guilt.

That’s where Judas ended up—turning completely away from his Savior to his sinful self. And the most tragic thing about it? When Judas finally came to his senses, he turned one last time away from Jesus who offered him full and free forgiveness. Because he felt guilty, he went to the priests and tried to unbuy the mess he made with those 30 pieces of silver. Returning the silver couldn’t make things right. All the world’s gold and silver can’t make sin right! Only God’s holy and innocent blood can do that. But Judas—in his sinful despair—turned one last time away from his Savior’s lifeline of forgiveness and turned towards the noose.

Brothers and sisters, don’t turn toward your sin! Turn, instead, toward the Savior. Don’t turn toward your guilt. Turn to your God! *“But look at me...I’ve got greed in my heart, and lies on my lips, and blood on my hands, and lust in my eyes, and hate in the pit of my stomach, and dark thoughts in my head. Me? Turn to Jesus?”*

Yes, me. Yes, you. It is when we are overwhelmed by our sins that we need most to turn to Jesus. Because although we are as guilty as sin itself, Jesus will always turn towards us with his forgiving love.

Because of our sin, Jesus turns to us in love with every word he spoke and every deed he did. In the face of a lynch mob, Jesus told them to let his disciples go. Jesus, and Jesus alone, would endure the suffering and dying. The hands that had reached out to touch and heal were freely

offered to be bound and led away. The judge of the living and the dead willingly stood in the judgment hall of a petty ruler named Pilate. The feet that had once walked on water walked up the dusty trail of death to the summit of Golgatha.

Jesus—the crucified and living, the loving and forgiving—the Son of God, has suffered the hell that our betrayal deserved. That is why I can proudly tell you this: *It is impossible for you to be more forgiven now than you already are in Christ.* So turn to your sin and guilt? God forbid! That's a recipe for spiritual suicide as Judas shows us. But turn to your Savior? That's our answer. And may God help you to do it every day with this guarantee that St. Paul tells us **If we are faithless, he remains faithful, for he cannot disown himself**” (2 Ti 2:13).

Turn to Jesus; never turn away! Turn to him always so that you may continue to be with him. Amen.