

“I Tell You the Truth...One of You Will Betray Me”

Which conversation would you rather have: telling someone that a family member had a baby, or telling someone that a family member passed away? Telling someone they made the team, or telling someone they’ve been cut? Telling someone they’re approved for a loan, or telling someone they’ve been denied?

Even though our tongues are quite quick to criticize, would any of us here choose to be the bad news messenger over the good news messenger? I doubt it, but that doesn’t mean we need to avoid all tough conversations. You can’t *not* tell someone his or her grandma died. You can’t *not* tell someone they weren’t approved for their home loan. Tough conversations need to occur, and they often start out this way: “Have a seat. We need to talk.” Today, we see Jesus sitting or, technically, “reclining” at the Passover table, and he’s about to have one of the toughest conversations ever. It goes like this: **“I tell you the truth, one of you will betray me—one who is eating with me.”** Let’s read how this conversation took place, from Mark 14:12-21.

¹² On the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, when it was customary to sacrifice the Passover lamb, Jesus’ disciples asked him, “Where do you want us to go and make preparations for you to eat the Passover?”

¹³ So he sent two of his disciples, telling them, “Go into the city, and a man carrying a jar of water will meet you. Follow him. ¹⁴ Say to the owner of the house he enters, ‘The Teacher asks: Where is my guest room, where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?’ ¹⁵ He will show you a large upper room, furnished and ready. Make preparations for us there.”

¹⁶ The disciples left, went into the city and found things just as Jesus had told them. So they prepared the Passover.

¹⁷ When evening came, Jesus arrived with the Twelve. ¹⁸ While they were reclining at the table eating, he said, “I tell you the truth, one of you will betray me—one who is eating with me.”

¹⁹ They were saddened, and one by one they said to him, “Surely not I?”

²⁰ “It is one of the Twelve,” he replied, “one who dips bread into the bowl with me. ²¹ The Son of Man will go just as it is written about him. But woe to that man who betrays the Son of Man! It would be better for him if he had not been born.”

Imagine starting that conversation. What would you have said? How would you have acted? If a friend betrays our confidence, we maybe give them the silent treatment, we avoid them, we yell at them, we get revenge on them, etc. But this “friend” wasn’t just going to betray Jesus’ confidence, he was going to betray his life. He was going to hand him over to death. Just imagine walking into a gathering of friends and family, and you knew one of them was going to hand you over to your killer. What would you do at that party? The way that Jesus handles himself, the way that he handled Judas and the other disciples in that very situation, is what makes this upper room conversation so amazing. Through these words, “I tell you the truth, one of you will betray me,” we see, first of all, Jesus is someone who is concerned.

He’s concerned for Judas. This is not the only time that Jesus sent out the warning to Judas. Comb through Jesus’ conversations and hear him caution, **“There are some of you who do not believe,”** or **“Have I not chosen you, the Twelve? Yet one of you is a devil!”** (Jn 6:64,70). Nor is this upper room warning going to be the last time Jesus reaches out to Judas. To the bitter end, in the Garden of Gethsemane when Judas leans in to kiss Jesus’ cheeks that are stained with the blood-like sweat that he

poured out in anguishing prayer, Jesus in love and concern still questions, “**Judas, are you betraying the Son of Man with a kiss?**” (Lk 22:48).

Jesus didn’t see Judas simply as a pawn of Satan who wasn’t worth his time and effort. He saw Judas as a soul—a soul that he was willing to die for, and a soul that he was willing to call to repentance. Marvel at the gentle way Jesus went about this. I think we often picture the bread-dipping scene in the upper room as one of these moments, the sort that on television shows break to commercial just before the final reveal. And we rush back to the television after the break with all eyes fixed to see who is singled out. But then why is it that half the disciples thought Judas left the room to go pay the Passover tab or give money to the poor? Jesus was so concerned for Judas, so patient with him, that he got his point across without belittling or berating him. Many at the table had no idea what had been revealed.

But it wasn’t just Judas who Jesus was concerned about. By generically saying, “**I tell you the truth, one of you will betray me—one who is eating with me,**” Jesus also showed his concern for the other disciples and where their hearts were that night as he dined with them. This was his last chance to prepare them before he went to the cross. He eagerly looked forward to this night and how he might have his last Bible class with them before he died. This “I tell you the truth” statement wasn’t just for Judas’ ears, it was for all of theirs. How do we know? Remember their response? Mark reports, “**They were saddened.**” Not just saddened because Jesus was going to be betrayed. Not just saddened because one of their colleagues was plotting this awful thing. But saddened because they weren’t sure if he was talking about them or not. Jesus’ words led the disciples to take their eyes off their meal for a second and search their own hearts and to think the unthinkable. Jesus’ “I tell you the truth” statement led the disciples to reflect on their own sinfulness, which prompted them to ask one by one, “**Surely not I?**”

Three little words. But can anything pack a more powerful punch for us than the question, “Surely not I,” especially when you consider who asked the question? These were people who had front-pew seats for Jesus’ sermons. These were people who had witnessed his miracles. These were people who had seen his glory shine. Yet, Jesus’ words prompted them to ask, “Is it I?” and for one of them the answer was “Yes.” Instead of leading us to lash out at Judas, “How could you?” might Jesus’ “I tell you the truth” statement lead each of us to ask, “Surely not I?” I know the secrets of my own heart. I know how often my outward actions do not measure up with inward motives. I know there is a hypocrisy gene in my makeup, and I know that Jesus knows it too. And soon we realize that even the unthinkable isn’t so unimaginable. Sure, from our cushy New Testament seat around that upper room table, we know it was Judas’ hand that dipped bread into the bowl, but we also know it could have been ours. We know it was Judas who would have been better off if he had not been born. But a reflection of our own sinful hearts knows Jesus would have every right to sound his caution to any one of us.

But Jesus doesn’t want that for us, just like he didn’t want that for the disciples, just like he didn’t want that for Judas. Thank God, out of concern our Savior made the statement, “I tell you the truth, one of you will betray me.” Thank God, our Savior is concerned about our sinfulness enough to have the tough conversation and not just let it slide. But then also know this same truth statement doesn’t just show Jesus as someone who is concerned, it also shows that Jesus is someone who is in control.

This fact became crystal clear even before the first piece of bread was broken that night. The Bible says he sent a few disciples to make preparations and they “**found things just as Jesus had told them.**” Not “similar to,” not “about,” not “close enough,” but “just as.” On a night that, to the outsider, looks like one that spiraled out of control for Jesus, how important it is to be reminded from the onset that he was in complete control. From the preparations to the arrest to the kangaroo court, Jesus was always in control.

And he was in control when it came to his betrayer. Here is where these words, “I tell you the truth,” really hit home. This wasn’t a game of Clue in which Jesus was trying to guess how he would die or who would hand him over. Jesus wasn’t trying to interrogate any one of his disciples into a confession so he knew whom to avoid. He knew. He testified. He had firsthand knowledge that Judas was going to hand him over to the enemy that very night. He knew what the truth was and yet he allowed it to happen.

From our perspective, doesn’t that raise our appreciation for our Savior’s love and passion? Maybe you’ve heard the saying, “A friend is someone who knows everything about you and still likes you.” A Savior, our Savior, is someone who knew everything that he would have to do and he still did it. But why? If he knew everything “just as” it was going to happen and was in such complete control, why did he let Judas betray him and why did he fall into the betrayer’s “trap”? Because not only did Jesus know “just as” it would happen, he also knew “just as” it was written. In order to fulfill Scripture, in order to fulfill God’s salvation plan, **“The Son of Man will go just as it is written about him.”** For a thousand years, the scrolls of Scripture had made this part of God’s plan public knowledge, **“Even my close friend, whom I trusted, he who shared my bread, has lifted up his heel against me”** (Ps 41:9). There was no other way. Jesus had to be betrayed. And so he was.

The fact that he did everything according to God’s plan shows that Jesus was in complete control. Oh, I suppose our minds will still wonder, “Couldn’t this or that have happened? Wasn’t there an option 2, 3, or 4?” Well, if a relief pitcher strikes out the side with nine straight 100 miles-per-hour fastballs to preserve the win, would a reporter ask in the postgame interview, “Why didn’t you throw the curve?” Then why do we worry our minds over an option 2 when option 1 worked?

Oh sure, it didn’t work out for Judas, but that was because he rejected God’s plan. Thus, Jesus, the One who controls people’s eternal welfare, could say, **“Woe to that man who betrays the Son of Man!”** But note, it was “one of the Twelve” who betrayed the Son of Man, not twelve of twelve. All would desert him. All were capable of betraying him. But not all received woe. And neither will you. The plan worked. The Lord who is so concerned about you that he called you to repentance—his plan worked. The Lord who controls all things, including his own betrayal, so that he could win a place in heaven for you—his plan worked. And that’s not a tough conversation to have with you. You didn’t have to sit down to hear that news. You can sing, “Chief of sinners though I be, Jesus shed his blood for me” (CW 385:1). Amen.