

The Heart of the Gospel: Gethsemane to the Burial of Christ

Chapter 7: Remorse and Suicide of Judas the Betrayer

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Then Judas, which had betrayed him, when he saw that he was condemned, repented himself, and brought again the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and elders, saying, “I have sinned in that I have betrayed the innocent blood.” And they said, “What is that to us? See thou to that.” And he cast down the pieces of silver in the temple, and departed, and went and hanged himself. And the chief priests took the silver pieces, and said, “It is not lawful for to put them into the treasury, because it is the price of blood.” And they took counsel, and bought with them the potter's field, to bury strangers in. Wherefore that field was called, the field of blood, unto this day. Then was fulfilled that which was spoken by Jeremy the prophet, saying, “And they took the thirty pieces of silver, the price of him that was valued, whom they of the children of Israel did value; and gave them for the potter's field, as the Lord appointed me.” (Mt. 27:3-10)

Now this man purchased a field with the reward of iniquity; and falling headlong, he burst asunder in the midst, and all his bowels gushed out. And it was known unto all the dwellers at Jerusalem; insomuch as that field is called in their proper tongue, Aceldama, that is to say, the field of blood. (Acts 1:18-19)

After the brief early morning meeting of the Sanhedrin (see Mk. 15:1; Mt. 27:1; Lk. 22:66-71) where the verdict against Jesus is made official (The Jewish leaders ratified their condemnation of Christ after dawn to give their illegal night trial an air of legality), Judas learns that the Savior has been condemned to death. This knowledge causes Judas to change his mind (*metameletheis*, repented) regarding his treachery. As a result the betrayer strongly regrets what he has done, is filled with remorse and attempts to return the money he received for his wicked deed. The chief priests and leaders reject Judas' offer because it was blood money. (Such money was contaminated and abhorrent to God [cf. Deut. 23:18] and could not be used as funds for the temple.) Therefore, the betrayer casts the money into the temple, departs and then hangs himself. Luke, in his account in the book of Acts, gives some gruesome details regarding the death of Judas that are not mentioned by Matthew. We can infer from Luke's account that the rope either broke when he hanged himself or was cut by someone after he was already dead. As a result he likely landed on a sharp rock that caused his body to burst open at the abdomen and all his intestines spilled out.

The money that was cast into the temple was used by the chief priests to buy a potter's field for the burial of strangers. That they would use the money for a charitable purpose indicates that they understood to a degree the evil nature of their deeds. The expression “potter's field” indicates that the field had been used by potters to obtain their clay. Perhaps the good clay was exhausted and the land was put on the market by the owner or owners. This field became known by the people of Jerusalem as *Hakeldama*—“the field of blood” because it was purchased with blood money. Providentially its name stood as a testimony against the wicked deeds of Judas and the Sanhedrin. Some scholars believe that Acts 1:18 implies that the field derived its name

because Judas committed suicide there with its bloody result. If this is the case then the expression “field of blood” would have a gruesome double meaning.

The account in Matthew regarding Judas and the purchase of the field is not repeated in any of the other gospel narratives. Matthew, writing to a predominately Jewish audience, included this account to emphasize the fulfillment of prophecy in these events. “Matthew’s main goal in the pericope is obviously the fulfillment quotation with which it ends. The pericope is shaped with this in mind from the start, i.e. in the reference to Judas’ return of thirty pieces of silver (v. 3) but also clearly in the deliberation of the chief priests and their purchase of the field (vv. 6-8).”¹

In Matthew’s account the sorrow and suicide of Judas is placed only a few verses after the godly contrition of Peter. The apostle, writing under divine inspiration, wants to note the contrast between biblical repentance and an unregenerate, worldly sorrow that leads to death. The gospels anticipate this great difference by noting what Jesus does for Peter, yet fails to do for Judas. Christ prayed for Peter that his faith would not fail (Lk. 22:32). As a faithful High Priest the Savior interceded on Peter’s behalf so that his backsliding would only be temporary. Judas, on the other hand, receives no such treatment. Our Lord simply says, “Woe to that man by whom he is betrayed” (Lk. 22:22). Further, Jesus looked upon Peter immediately after his fall with love and concern coupled with the efficacious power of the Holy Spirit that brought the apostle to his right mind. For Judas there would be no loving gaze; he is a vessel of wrath prepared for destruction (Rom. 9:22). While both men are completely responsible for their actions, the ultimate difference between Peter’s genuine repentance and Judas’ apostasy is the decree of God, election and the Lord’s particular atonement. Peter did not apostatize because the Savior would not let him. Judas, however, was passed by. As we study the horrible end of Judas, there are a number of things that merit our attention.

(1) The Greek word which is used to describe Judas’ change of mind (*metamelomai*) is quite different from the other Greek verb translated repent (*metanoeo*) which is used to describe repentance unto salvation. “*Metamoero* basically means to ‘change one’s mind.’ So it is properly translated ‘repent’ in most instances. It involves the intellect and will. *Metamelomai* has to do more with the emotions, and so does not indicate true biblical repentance.”² Judas had a change of mind in that he was sorry after reflecting on the results of what he had done. He was filled with grief, anguish and perhaps even indignation for the consequences of his act. But his high degree of remorse did not involve a true understanding of the nature of sin or a commitment to return to Christ and seek forgiveness from God. Matthew uses *metamelomai* to emphasize the deep emotional aspect of Judas’ regret. When Peter became sorrowful his response was to pray to God and return to the disciples. In other words he turned from disobedience to obedience. Judas, on the other hand, murdered himself—a despicable act. Suicide was the pagan thing to do. “From a Greco-Roman perspective, suicide was the only honorable deed for one who betrayed his teacher.”³

Judas’ repentance was not for sin as committed against God and Christ, but for the consequences of sin. His sorrow did not spring from a love and fear of God as supremely holy, just, good and merciful as evangelical repentance does. Rather, it was more a foretaste of the regret that individuals suffer in hell. It was not a repentance that results from true saving faith, but rather a black, terrifying despair. It was a humanistic, worldly repentance that did not look to

¹ Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14-20*, 811.

² Ralph Earle, *Word Meanings in the New Testament*, 26.

³ Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14-28*, 813.

Christ for redemption, but instead wallowed in self-pity and a tortured conscience. There is nothing noble or virtuous in the world's repentance, for it seeks relief not in Christ but in death. As Paul says, "For godly sorrow produces repentance leading to salvation, not to be regretted; but the sorrow of the world produces death" (2 Cor. 7:1). The apostle says that there is godly sorrow, which acknowledges God and his commandments, which sorrows over God's broken law and the dishonor to His throne and turns to a new obedience. And there is worldly sorrow which works out its fulfillment in death. Hughes writes,

The sorrow of the world, indeed, is not something distinct from sin; on the contrary, it partakes of the very essence of sin. It is not sorrow because of the heinousness of sin as rebellion against God, but sorrow because of the painful and unwelcome consequences of sin. Self is its central point; and self is also the central point of sin. Thus the sorrow of the world may be very bitter and intense, like that of Esau who sorrowed with many tears over his lost birthright but found no place of repentance (Heb. 12:16f.). David also suffered extreme sorrow because of his sin, but his sorrow was directed to God in deep penitence. Acknowledging his guilt and unworthiness, he cried to God for forgiveness: "Wash me thoroughly from mine iniquity and cleanse me from my sin; for I acknowledge my transgressions and my sin is ever before me. Against Thee, Thee only have I sinned..." (Psa. 51:2ff.). His was truly godly sorrow—centred in God and His holiness. And such godly sorrow is transmuted into godly joy—the joy of God's salvation and the praise of His goodness (Psa. 51:12ff.). The sorrow of the world, on the other hand, culminates in the weeping and gnashing of teeth of judgment (Mt. 13:42, 50; 25:30); it earns the wages of sin (Rom. 6:23).⁴

(2) Judas' wickedness is confirmed by his confession to the chief priests. Judas admits that Jesus was completely innocent. "I have sinned by betraying innocent blood" (Mt. 27:4). The betrayer had spent almost every hour of every day with the Savior for over three years. He had seen the Master's miracles; observed His many good works; watched the Messiah's impeccable behavior; and, heard His perfect doctrines. If anyone could have pinned sinful words or deeds on Christ, it would have been Judas. Yet Judas admits before the chief priests that Jesus is completely innocent of any wrong. David Brown writes,

What a testimony this is to Jesus! Judas...post, as treasurer to Him and the Twelve (John xii. 6), gave him peculiar opportunity of watching the spirit, disposition, and habits of his Master; while his covetous nature and thievish practices would incline him to dark and suspicious, rather than frank and generous, interpretations of all that He said and did. If then, he could have

⁴ Philip E. Hughes, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), 272-273. Calvin writes, "True repentance is displeasure at sin, arising out of fear and reverence for God, and producing, at the same time, a love and desire of righteousness. Wicked men are far from such a feeling; for they would desire to sin without intermission, and even, as far as lies in their power, they endeavor to deceive both God and their own conscience; but notwithstanding their reluctance and opposition, they are tormented with blind horror by their conscience, so that, though they do not hate their sin, still they feel, with sorrow and distress, that it presses heavily and painfully upon them. This is the reason why their grief is useless; for they do not cheerfully turn to God, or even aim at doing better, but, being attached to their wicked desires, they pine away in torment, which they cannot escape. In this way, as I have just said, God punishes their obstinacy; for although his elect are drawn to him by severe chastisements, and as it were contrary to their will, yet he heals in due time the wounds which he has inflicted, so that they come cheerfully to him, by whose hand they acknowledge that they are struck, and by whose wrath they are alarmed. The former, therefore, while they have no hatred to sin, not only dread, but fly from the judgment of God, and thus, having received an incurable wound, they perish in the midst of their sorrows" (*Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark and Luke*, 3:269).

fastened on one questionable feature in all that he had so long witnessed, we may be sure that no such speech as this would ever have escaped his lips, nor would he have been so stung with remorse as not to be able to keep the money and survive his crime.⁵

This confession proves that Judas had betrayed the Savior with wicked motives and that the Master was truly the Messiah—the sinless Son of God. It also demonstrates that people can know the truth about our Lord, but not trust in Him for salvation or commit themselves to His cause. There are many people in the United States that know the truth regarding Jesus, yet do not act upon it. Knowledge of the Savior without trust and confession will only increase one’s guilt on the day of judgment.

Note also that Judas’ confession is deficient and humanistic. The betrayer does not confess his sins to God or Christ but to wicked unbelievers, the enemies of the Messiah. People that do not believe in Jesus do not flee to His mercy to deal with their guilt; but rather look to useless men who have no real ability to soothe a guilty conscience. In our anti-Christian culture people seek solutions for guilt in drugs (e.g., Valium, Prozac, Marijuana, LSD, etc), therapy (secular counseling, psychology, scientology), good works (e.g., help in a soup kitchen), drunkenness, and various false religions or philosophies. All non-Christian systems have certain things in common when it comes to the problem of guilt. Guilt is either denied by an attempt to evade individual responsibility (much of politics and counseling follows this methodology); or, people seek to ignore guilt by sending it into oblivion through drugs, alcohol or suicide. The Bible alone deals with guilt head on by the sacrificial death of Christ. One must accept individual responsibility for one’s own sin and guilt and one must trust in the sacrificial death of Jesus, trusting that all of one’s guilt is imputed to Him on the cross. When we confess, we must confess our sins to God through Christ saying, “I have sinned, Father, against heaven, forgive my sins on account of Your precious Son and His perfect, vicarious sacrifice.”

(3) Judas’ confession was mocked and dismissed by the chief priests. They said, “What is that to us? You see to it!” (Mt. 27:4). Because of psychological pain, Judas seeks relief for his guilty conscience by confessing to the chief priests and giving their money back. The Sanhedrin, however, couldn’t care less about Judas’ predicament. They used him to get at the Messiah and they didn’t really care whether Jesus was innocent or guilty. They in essence laugh at Judas’ guilt and misery. “*The chief priests and elders* had no more pity for Judas than they had for Jesus; no remorse troubled them, they had secured the Savior, and they cared nothing for any of the consequences of their action. As for the traitor, he had made his bargain, and he must abide by it.”⁶

Judas was wicked, yet his conscience was awakened after the dirty deed was done. The Sanhedrin reveals an even greater depth of evil and carelessness regarding sin. The fact that they had thirsted for Jesus’ blood, and hired Judas with a bribe to betray Him meant nothing to these reprobates. The fact that they had unjustly condemned the Prince of Life to be tortured and hung on a cross meant nothing to them. “Thus do fools make a mock[ery] at sin, as if no harm was done, no hazard run, by the commission of the greatest wickedness.”⁷ By way of application, what does this light treatment of sin say about our culture where Christ crucified is the subject of jokes and coarse jesting on television and in the movies? The person and work of Christ is fair

⁵ David Brown, *The Four Gospels: A Commentary, Critical, Experimental and Practical* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, [1864] 1969), 126.

⁶ Charles H. Spurgeon, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 396.

⁷ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:412-413.

game in our culture for every conceivable blasphemy and outrage (e.g., *The Last Temptation of Christ*, *The Da Vinci Code*, etc).

The reaction of the chief priest to Judas' predicament ought to stand as a warning to everyone who keeps company with wicked men or who participates in their sinful deeds. There is no genuine biblical love among the wicked, only self-interest. When a person is popular he is loved by the crowd, but when he is down his so-called friends scatter. The Sanhedrin was glad to make use of Judas for their sinful interests. They were very happy to see him. They were very friendly toward him with smiles and gifts. But now that he was not needed and was in despair, he meant nothing to them. Such is the way of the world where relationships are built on self-interests, lusts and sin. Men use women and women use men. When marriage becomes boring, spouses are cast off for new, sinful experiences. The Sanhedrin is a reflection of this wicked world. The community and fellowship of the "in-crowd," the Beatniks, the hippies and the counter-culture were not rooted in biblical love which is founded upon biblical law, but rather upon selfishness, lust and sin.

The Sanhedrin was not concerned with Judas's sin even though they were chief participants in it. Professing Christians need to understand that doing anything to support sin (no matter how small or supposedly insignificant) is itself sinful. Believers should not be supporting wicked institutions and organizations with their money. If a company strongly supports abortion on demand and sodomite rights (e.g., Hollywood, Disney Corp., etc), or has a large side business in pornography (e.g., AT&T, General Motors, etc), Christians must avoid their products.

(4) Judas' actions resulted in the purchase of the potter's field by the chief priests, which is a fulfillment of prophecy. "Then was fulfilled what was spoken by Jeremiah the prophet, saying, and they took the thirty pieces of silver, the value of Him who was priced, whom they of the children of Israel priced, and gave them for the potter's field, as the LORD directed me"(Mt. 27:9-10).

Although Matthew mentions only Jeremiah, the prophecy is an allusion to Zechariah 11:12-13: "Then I said to them, 'If it is agreeable to you, give me my wages; and if not refrain.' So they weighed out for my wages thirty pieces of silver. And the LORD said to me, 'Throw it to the potter'—that princely price they set on me. So I took the thirty pieces of silver and threw them into the house of the LORD for the potter." It also refers to Jeremiah 19:1-13. Regarding Jeremiah 19 Hendriksen writes, "Note all the resemblances: Judah and Jerusalem have shed innocent blood (Jer. 19:4; Matt. 27:3, 6, 7). Chief priests and elders are mentioned prominently (Jer. 19:1; Matt. 27:3, 6, 7). A potter is mentioned (Jer. 19:1, 11; Matt. 27:7, 10). Tophet, that is, the valley of Hinnom—the very valley where, according to tradition, the Potter's field was located—has its name changed to 'the Valley of Slaughter,' which is about the same as 'the Field of Blood' (Jer. 19:6; Matt. 27:8; cf. Acts 1:19). And this valley became a well-known 'burial place' (Jer. 19:11; Matt. 27:7)."⁸ We must remember that if Mark or Matthew would allude to

⁸ William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 948. There are a number of theories as to why Matthew says Jeremiah when the main passage in view is in from Zechariah. Perhaps the best view, other than the one mentioned above, is that among the Jews the sacred writings were divided into three parts: the law, the prophets and the writings. According to the Talmudic tradition the prophets were divided into two sections. The section that contained Jeremiah and Zechariah began with the book of Jeremiah. Therefore, if Matthew was using a scroll that contained Zechariah, the scroll would say Jeremiah on its cover. Therefore, to a first century Jew a quotation from Jeremiah could refer to any prophet in that scroll.

Whatever theory one adheres to, one thing is certain. Matthew was not uninformed about the Old Testament Scriptures. He would not have made such an obvious mistake. And even if he did, it would have been corrected in his own lifetime. Further, given the doctrine of inspiration, it is impossible for Matthew to be in error.

two prophets, one a major and the other a minor prophet, then sometimes only the major prophet is mentioned (e.g., see Mk. 1:2-3 where Mark ascribes prophecies from Malachi and Isaiah to Isaiah alone).

Matthew is doing two things by the allusion to these prophecies. First, he is demonstrating that God's sovereign plan regarding the Messiah has been carried out. That is, Jesus perfectly fulfills the Old Testament prophecies. Therefore, to deny Christ is to deny the authority of the Holy Scriptures. Second, the allusion to Jeremiah 19 ought to strike terror into the hearts of those who have rejected and murdered Jesus because of this chapter's horrifying description of God's judgment upon Judah. "The priests," says Hengstenberg, "removed the gold, as unclean, out of the temple, and purchased with it a mean spot in that very valley, which, at an earlier period, had been polluted by innocent blood, and had brought upon Jerusalem the vengeance of the Lord."⁹ Judah and Jerusalem will fall by the sword (19:7) and become like Tophet, the place for the dead (19:12). Because of what the Sanhedrin did to the Messiah, the whole nation will become a "valley of slaughter," "a field of blood." The chief priests' joy as a result of their delivering up the Savior will be turned into dread, shock, horror and despair.

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⁹ E. W. Hengstenberg, *Christology of the Old Testament* as quoted in James Morison, 575.