

**Matthew 27:1-5** *Early in the morning, all the chief priests and the elders of the people made their plans how to have Jesus executed. <sup>2</sup>So they bound him, led him away and handed him over to Pilate the governor. <sup>3</sup>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. <sup>4</sup>"I have sinned," he said, "for I have betrayed innocent blood." "What is that to us?" they replied. "That's your responsibility." <sup>5</sup>So Judas threw the money into the temple and left. Then he went away and hanged himself.*

Dear friends in Christ Jesus,

It hurts when someone turns away from you. I think that we have all experienced that at one time or another in one way or another. Maybe it was during your teens or 20's that a boyfriend or girlfriend you really cared about decided to turn away from your relationship and chose to show their affection to someone else who replaced you. Perhaps it was an employer who one day out of the blue called you into his office and explained they were turning away from you and going in a different direction. As a pastor I know the hurt of people who become very close to you and are supportive and helpful in the ministry but suddenly turn away and leave giving the impression that everything you have done in sharing God's Word with them meant nothing and was worthless. It's likely that every one of us has felt the pain of a loved one who has walked away and turned to another 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?

Judas had become one of the 12 disciples, one of the men who were closest to Jesus. For three years he walked with Jesus and learned from him along with the other 11. He would have been right there with the other disciples preaching the Word, cleansing the lepers, healing the sick, driving out the demons and even raising the dead as Jesus commissioned them to do. We can only assume that he was a zealous disciple, an eager servant and a faithful follower.

So what happened to Judas that would turn him from raising the dead to betraying the Lord of life? It wasn't something that happened in a day. Satan began to slowly work on Judas' heart to turn him over time. The weak spot in Judas that the devil exploited was greed. He was the poster boy of someone who loved money too much. Even though Jesus had warned him time and again about a man's money and a man's heart throughout his teaching, Judas turned away from Jesus and slowly, steadily turned toward the shine of silver and the glitter of gold. It was probably innocent at first. Sin always is. He was entrusted with the important job of keeping the disciples' treasury safe and in good order. Perhaps the trouble began by writing himself a personal loan promising himself he'd pay it back later. From there it grew. Cash was consistently passing his hands. Opportunity for lining his pockets came easy and often. John tells us that when he complained about the expense of the perfume poured on Jesus' feet, he wasn't really worried about the charity that could be done with that money. He was more concerned with the money he couldn't take for himself because it was—in his estimation—wasted on Jesus.

Then came the ultimate opportunity for easy money. His friendship with Christ had put him into contact with Christ's enemies—rich, powerful enemies who were willing to pay cold cash for just one kiss in the darkness. We note how far Judas had turned by how deliberate he was in his sin. He discussed this transaction with the religious leaders. He watched for an opportunity to betray Jesus. He led the detachment of soldiers, carefully picking out the correct path to Gethsemane. He even tried to cover his tracks in the garden with a pre-arranged signal of a kiss. Judas got his money: 30 pieces of silver, the price of a common slave. He may have gotten his money, but he forfeited his soul. When he finally came to his senses after seeing Jesus led away like a lamb to the slaughter, he had a change of mind. But rather than turning to Jesus for full and free forgiveness, he turned instead to his guilty conscience and all his sins' ugliness. Instead of turning to the Lord for mercy, he turned instead to the corrupt priests in an effort to unbuy his betrayal. Returning the silver couldn't make the mess of his sin right. All the world's silver and gold can't make a sin right. Only the innocent blood of Jesus could make the mess of our sin right. Judas, in the grips of satanic despair, grabbed for a noose instead of the lifeline of Christ's mercy. Sadly, because he failed to trust in the forgiveness his Savior came to win for him, he suffers penniless in hell to this very day.

God doesn't share this story with us so that we can pity Judas. Rather he shares this story to serve as warning about what can happen to people who fall away from their Savior. Scripture is littered and hell is bursting with examples of people who were at one point true, faithful Christians and yet who eventually turned away from Jesus! They turned away from God for foreign wives or another man's wife; turned away for 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. We may stand here tonight boldly declaring, "I would NEVER fall away from Jesus." I pray that is so. Truly,

I do. But we must also be on guard. I've seen too many people who promised this very thing yet allowed something to separate them from Christ. For some it was giving in to the pressure of the world and following a doctrine or truth that went directly against what God said in Scripture. For others, they allowed unresolved issues keep them from forgiving others who had wronged them in some way and allowed their hurt to fester until it finally caused them to separate from God and the church completely. For others it was the love of money that took their heart away from God. We must be on guard.

Greed, unconfessed sin, premediated sin and putting Jesus on a shelf to put the world first is a toxic brew that can quickly turn us away from Jesus, turn us toward sin, and can eventually separate us from God and lead us into unbelief. Don't turn towards your sin. Turn towards your Savior. Yes, you may have greed in your heart, lies on your lips, blood on your hands, lust in your eyes, hate in the pit of your stomach and dark thoughts in your head. These are exactly the reasons Jesus came to this earth. Yes, you are guilty. But don't despair. Jesus loves you anyway. When Judas betrayed him, Jesus allowed himself to be arrested so that he could endure the suffering and death needed as payment for your sin. Even though Judas betrayed him, Jesus still called him friend. Jesus willingly allowed himself to be bound and led away, judged by Pilate and crucified on Calvary. Jesus—the crucified and living, the loving and forgiving—the Son of God has suffered the hell our betrayal deserved. He loves you and forgives you and continues to offer to you the eternal life he won for you.

Nothing you do can be too big or so great that Jesus can't love you or forgive you. His suffering, death and resurrection have already covered every sin that you could commit. When you sin, and when like Judas you recognize that sin and feel the weight and guilt of that sin, don't despair. Don't turn away. Don't turn to yourself. Turn only to Jesus and be certain of his love and forgiveness. Amen.