

Betrayal in the Garden

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[0 : 00] When I was in elementary school, our school had an essay writing contest, and somehow I won the contest.

It was the first time I had won anything like that. I was pretty young, and I was excited. And part of the fact that I won meant that at the big end-of-year assembly, I had to read my essay in front of all the school and the parents.

And so this is the days before computers. And so there was only one handwritten copy of my essay that I kept in my desk. You could open the desk and put it in. That's where my copy of my essay was.

So right before the assembly, I went to get my essay, and I opened my desk, and it wasn't there. And I looked everywhere. I looked in my bag. I looked in my cubby. I looked back in my desk. I looked in my books, and I couldn't find the essay anywhere. The assembly started, and so when it came time for me to get up and to read the essay, I kind of came to the microphone, and I sort of mumbled into the microphone, I think I lost my essay.

[1 : 03] And there was a kind of laugh from the crowd, and then I went and sat back down, pretty embarrassed. And it drove me crazy. What happened to that essay? I knew it was right there. Where had it gone?

I found out a couple of days later what had happened. My best friend at the time had been jealous that I had won instead of him, and so he snuck in and took my essay and crumpled it up and threw it away.

Now, I'm sure you can probably think of worse examples of betrayal. I mean, I certainly can. But for me in elementary school, that was my first taste of betrayal.

It was the first time that something like that had been done directly to me. And when something like that happens, it's not only painful, but it's disorienting. It begins to shift around your understanding of how the world works and how relationships work.

New possibilities open up that you didn't consider before. You start to wonder, who can I trust? Is this a normal kind of thing that people do to one another?

[2 : 12] It makes you doubt your own judgment. Shouldn't I have seen that coming? And then as you think more deeply about it, more self-reflectively, it makes you think, would I be capable of doing something like that to somebody else?

Can I be trusted in such circumstances? I asked ChatGPT, the new source, great authority source in our society, to give me the worst examples of betrayal from history and literature.

And it popped up, you know, Benedict Arnold, Brutus betraying Julius Caesar, right? But at the top of the list, the top of the list, Judas Iscariot.

Judas' betrayal of Jesus. Judas is the ultimate betrayer. You know, in Dante's Inferno, the worst sinner of all is Judas Iscariot.

So, this morning we're going to look at this account in Matthew's gospel where we see why we live in a world where betrayal is so common, and we're going to see how Jesus changes everything in his response.

[3 : 28] So, two parts, Judas' betrayal and Jesus' response. Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for your word, and we thank you for this Palm Sunday. Lord, we thank you for your journey into Jerusalem.

No one there in the crowd knew what that journey meant. No one knew where it would lead except you. You knew where you were going.

You knew why you were doing it. And Lord, we pray that that would become more and more evident to us this morning. The reason you took that journey into Jerusalem was your love.

I pray that we would feel that as we open your word this morning, and we ask this in your Son's holy name. Amen. So, the first thing we want to look at is Judas' betrayal.

Let me set the scene for you a little bit. It's the middle of the night. Jesus has eaten the Passover meal with his disciples. They've all since come into the Garden of Gethsemane, the place that they often liked to come.

[4 : 31] As I said, it's at night. They're all there together except one. At some point, Judas Iscariot has slipped away. Then all of a sudden, there's the glow of torches.

There's the clanking of armor. There are weapons that appear out of the shadows. Several hundred people emerge from the shadowy darkness beyond the tree line.

It's a lynch mob, and it's made up of Romans and Jews, including scribes and elders and temple guards, even the high priest.

Judas then steps out from the crowd. He walks over to Jesus. He performs the prearranged signal that identifies Jesus as the one that needs to be seized.

He says, greetings, rabbi, and then he kisses him on the cheek. Now, commentators point out that in this culture, if you had a student and a rabbi, that the student would never greet the rabbi first.

[5 : 36] The student would always wait for the rabbi to acknowledge and speak first. And to do this is a great sign of disrespect to your rabbi. It's essentially saying, you're no better than me.

I'm your equal. It's a repudiation of Jesus' authority. So, he's claiming equal status with his rabbi. You're no longer my authority. I reject you. So, Judas is rejecting Jesus' authority, and he's also claiming to be his equal, if not his superior.

Now, Judas' betrayal of Jesus, as we already said, is notorious, right? Jesus has showed him nothing but love and kindness for three years, and yet Judas is willing to sell Jesus out for 30 pieces of silver.

Judas is the worst, right? Or is he? Is he, right? Earlier that evening, as they were eating, Jesus had predicted that Judas was going to betray him.

But then, when they get to the garden, Jesus makes another prediction. All of the disciples are going to abandon him before the night is over. All of them.

[6 : 49] Peter becomes indignant. He says, I'm not going to abandon you. I would never abandon you. In fact, I would die before I would abandon you. And then all the other disciples join in. We would die before we would ever betray you or abandon you.

But sure enough, once Jesus has been arrested, verse 56 says, all the disciples left him and fled. What's the point?

Well, I think that there's a great relief that comes from demonizing someone like Judas. Certainly, history has demonized him. But there's a great relief that comes with turning someone like Judas into a kind of moral monster, an inhuman monster, because the more we do that, the more we can convince ourselves that we are nothing like him.

No normal, ordinary, compassionate, thoughtful, devoted person would do what he did. Certainly not someone like me. But the truth is, the betrayal in this garden resembles another betrayal that happened in another garden a long time ago, where we see God create human beings to worship and serve him alone, meaning that we're most fully human when we're worshiping and serving God. But then in the garden, the first humans disobeyed God by eating the fruit he told them not to eat. Spoiler alert, it's not about the fruit. When they make this choice, it is out of their desire to be like God, right, to reject God's authority, to claim equality with God.

[8 : 33] We want to determine for ourselves right and wrong. We want to be like you. That was the nature of the temptation. So when Judas betrays Jesus, this is just an echo of Eden.

This garden is a mere echo of the events that took place in that garden. And so what this means for us is that Judas isn't uniquely evil as much as we would like to think that as much as history has portrayed him as such.

Judas follows Jesus as long as it benefits him, but given the opportunity, he's willing to sell him out for some silver. But the other disciples do the same thing.

They follow Jesus until it might cost them too much. And then they abandoned him, even Peter. So then that begins to get closer and closer and closer and more and more personal until we are forced to ask, what about me?

What about us? You know, if life is going well, I think we're happy and we're feeling fulfilled and there's meaning and we're getting something out of our faith.

[9 : 43] When we pray or when we go to church or when we read the Bible, there's a sense of connection with God and it helps us deal with our anxiety and our depression and be a little more patient with our kids, then we're content to follow Jesus.

But what happens when things get harder or what happens when our faith becomes more costly? Because, you know, I don't have to tell you, following Jesus is costly.

What happens when inflation hits, right, and the cost goes up? Because following Jesus may mean a lot of things.

It may mean facing ridicule or being excluded from certain social circles. It may mean having to forgive someone instead of demanding retribution, which is a lot more costly.

Holding on to anger and bitterness. That's where most of our hearts want to be. Following Jesus may mean giving generously when you lack financial security yourself.

[10 : 43] When you're not actually giving off the top, you're giving something that actually represents a sacrifice for you. It may mean praising God even when He doesn't answer prayer in the way that you would want.

It may mean staying single instead of being in a relationship that runs against God's will for your life. It may mean passing up major career opportunities that run against God's will for your life, right? At some point, your faith is going to start to really cost something. And then we ask ourselves, what do I do in times like that? Am I going to stay with Jesus or am I going to take the silver, whatever that silver represents?

In the words of the great sociologist Pablo Escobar, everybody has a price.

Everybody has a price. The important thing is to find out what it is. Now that's a question worth thinking about. That is a question worth reflecting on.

[11 : 47] For Judas, it was 30 pieces of silver. What is my price? What is your price? In what area of your life do you say, I will follow Jesus if?

I'll follow Jesus as long as, right? That's price language. I'll follow Jesus as long as I can also have this. I'll follow Jesus as long as He doesn't ever ask me to do that or to give that up.

Whatever that is for you, that's your price. So then this raises the question, if we begin to reflect on our own lives, our own hearts, we begin to realize, I do have a price.

In fact, I have several prices. Then how do we become the kind of people, how do we get the kinds of hearts where we don't have a price, where we say, I'm committed to Jesus no matter what.

I'm committed to my friends no matter what. I'm committed to my spouse no matter what. I'm the kind of person who can commit no matter what. How do we become that kind of person? And that's why Jesus' response is so crucial.

[13 : 00] Verse 51 says, one of the disciples, who do you think this is? One of the disciples who happens to be passionate and impetuous and sometimes acts before he thinks, draws a sword and cuts off the ear of the servant of the high priest.

John's gospel tells us this is Peter. And then Jesus says to Peter, put your sword back in its place, for all who take the sword will perish by the sword.

Now, what does that mean? What does it mean to take the sword? What does it mean that people who take the sword will perish by the sword? Some people think this is an argument for pacifism.

This is not contextually what's happening here. So what does this mean? In Peter's mind, in Peter and the other disciples, their way of breaking down the world, they represent the good guys.

And by the way, I think when most of us read the Bible, we also sort of think of Jesus and his merry band of disciples as the good guys. These are the good guys. Who are the bad guys? Well, they're the Jewish leaders.

[14 : 04] They're the Romans. Those are the bad guys. Right? The Jewish religious leaders were threatened by Jesus. They were jealous of Jesus. They just wanted him dead. This whole arrest in the middle of the night, which Jesus points out, you're coming at me like I'm a robber.

But they're trying to do this in secret. They're going to have this sham trial. Right? At Caiaphas' house, it's going to be a total... This is a lynch mob.

They're just trying to figure out a legal loophole to kill him. So they're bad guys. Then the Romans are the occupying force. A lot of these disciples are secretly, or not so secretly, hoping that at some point Jesus is going to say, okay, it's go time.

Grab your swords. Let's take out the Romans. And that the lightning is going to start to strike, and the meteors are going to fall, and there's going to be a divine overturning of Rome and a liberation

of Israel.

Like the good old days in the Old Testament. That's what they're hoping for. Good guys and bad guys. We're the good guys. They're the bad guys.

[15:06] Taking the sword means righteous indignation. Taking the sword means getting outraged over something that someone has said or done. Taking the sword means having the mentality that you are one of the good guys.

And the biggest problem in the world is the bad guys out there. And we live in a culture where everyone takes the sword. Right? I mean, Twitter is a bloodbath. Every day, daily bloodbath. Because everybody takes the sword. So if you're a traditional religious person, you might say, hey, who are the good guys?

The good guys are people like me. The people with morals that are grounded in tradition. They don't give in to this relativism. They're grounded in family values. They're people who pray. They're people who go to worship. They're people who read their holy scriptures, the Bible or the Koran. They're the people who give themselves to something bigger than themselves. These are the good guys.

[16:07] Who are the bad guys? Well, the bad guys are all those godless liberals and secular people. Pick up the sword against them. Right? But if you're a secular progressive person, you're going to have a very different standard.

You're going to say, well, who are the good guys? They're people like me. Obviously, they're people who believe in tolerance and people who believe in inclusion, people who are open-minded and people that believe that life is about being true to yourself.

And the worst thing you can do is yoke yourself to some old, dead, antiquated religion. Who are the bad guys? The bad guys are all those closed-minded bigots and religious extremists.

Take up the sword. Take up the sword. If you're a successful capitalist, who are the bad guys?

They're all those lazy, entitled people who want the government to do everything for them. If you're a Marxist, who are the bad guys?

They're the ones with all the power and privilege who oppress and marginalize others. Who are the bad guys? We've all got some sense of good guys and bad guys. And, you know, we can all do this in our personal relationships as well.

[17:06] Someone confronts you over something that you did. Hey, when you said this thing, it really hurt my feelings. When you did this, it was really challenging for me. And you get defensive and angry.

You know, you sort of feel that rise up in you like bile. And what happens? Well, you assemble your inner team of lawyers. Right?

We all keep these lawyers on retainer in here. Right? And they're just kind of sitting there. And the minute somebody kind of crosses that line with you, they call you out. I'm concerned about this in your life.

When you said this to me, it hurt my feelings. When you did this, it was embarrassing. Right?

Whatever it may be. And you're like, all right, guys, let's get to work. And your lawyers activate. And what do they start doing?

They start to justify you. Right? They start to build a case in your favor. They start to discredit the witnesses. They start to cross-examine.

[18:03] Right? They start building a case against the other person. You start blame-shifting and making counter-accusations. And in fact, you're really the victim here. Right? By the time they get done, the whole situation has been reversed.

And you're like, I like this version a whole lot better than their version. Because in this version, I'm the good guy. And you're the bad guy. I only did what I did because of what you did. You're taking up the sword.

You're taking up the sword. And Jesus says, put your sword back in its place. All who take the sword will perish by the sword.

You hurt me, I hurt you. You blame me, I blame you. You get revenge on me, I get revenge on you. You kill me, I kill you.

Taking up the sword only leads to division and death. It breaks down the fabric of society. It breaks down our institutions from within.

[19:09] It makes our democracy so dysfunctional that it can't operate.

Tears down families. Tears us apart from the inside out. Jesus says, don't follow the way of the sword. What does He say instead?

In everything He does, when He says, all of this is happening so that the Scriptures might be fulfilled. All of this is happening as it was written they would.

What's He talking about? He's talking about the cross. And so what is He saying? Don't follow the way of the sword. Follow the way of the cross.

What does that mean? Well, it means there has to be a major shift in our heart in the way we see the world. Alexander Solzhenitsyn, before he won the Nobel Prize, was a Marxist.

[20 : 08] He was an officer in the Red Army. There were clear lines between good guys and bad guys. And how do you know who the bad guys are? Well, they're the ones who get sent to the labor camps. But then something unthinkable happened.

He was caught criticizing Stalin and that he was sent to the camps himself. And then something changed in him because all of a sudden he, a good guy, is thrown in with all of these bad guys. And everything begins to shift and he begins to realize if only there were... This was all so simple. If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds.

And it was necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. His entire way of thinking shifted.

Instead of looking out here, instead of looking over there to those people or that group or that ideology, he began to look at himself, at his own heart. He put his sword back.

[21 : 17] The way of the sword says the problem is out there. It's those people. It's that institution. It's that tradition. It's that way of thinking. It's that lifestyle.

The way of the cross recognizes the truth. That part of the problem, maybe a bigger part than I would like to admit, is in here. It's in me.

Because the thing is, we all have a price. We all have hearts that have been warped by that first betrayal in Eden. We all have a Judas-shaped heart in us as a result of that.

So despite our best efforts, no one is unconditionally committed to loving and serving God. Because our real commitment is ultimately to ourselves. You know, I may have been betrayed in my life, whether it be elementary school or maybe other experiences I've had.

I may have been betrayed in my life, but listen, I've also betrayed others. And as much as I like to think of myself as a victim, I'm also a perpetrator.

[22 : 27] As much as I like to think of myself as a committed person, my commitments are, at the end of the day, somewhat conditional. My love is conditional. And this is precisely why Jesus came.

Jesus says to Peter, Don't you realize that I could say the word and twelve legions of angels would come to my aid? There's a legion for each of the remaining disciples and then one for Jesus.

We each get a legion. I could say the word and that would happen. What's he saying? Listen, Jesus isn't being forced to go to the cross by someone like the high priest.

Jesus is choosing to go to the cross because of someone like Peter. Because of someone like his disciples. Because of someone like me. And we begin to see the entire story from a new angle.

How do we become people with hearts that can be fully committed to Jesus? We have to look to the cross.

[23 : 39] And this is what we're going to be doing all week. It's what we do every time we gather. But especially this week. We're going to be looking at the cross. Before Jesus' disciples abandoned him, guess what?

Before they abandoned him, what happened? He was tempted to abandon them. While they were still in the garden, before he was arrested, Jesus goes off by himself.

He tells his disciples, stay watchful. People are coming for me. I'm going to go pray. He goes off to pray. He falls to his knees and says, in probably the greatest moment of doubt and struggle in his entire life, My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me.

You can imagine Jesus on his knees praying. And as he's praying, let this cup pass from me.

Looking at his disciples and what does he see? They've already fallen asleep. All I asked you to do was to stay awake.

To watch. Because I'm going to be arrested. Just give me five minutes to pray. They're already asleep. And you can imagine the voices in his head.

[24 : 44] Maybe the voice of Satan is saying, you would give everything up for them. They can't even stay awake. There's no commitment in their hearts. Father, if it be your will, let this cup pass from me.

But he refused to give in. And he says to his father, but not my will, but thy will be done. And what we need to understand, do you understand what this means?

Everybody has a price except Jesus. Because when Jesus looks at you, and I believe that he held all of us in his mind as he knelt there in the garden.

Because when Jesus looks at you, there is no price. There is no price that would be worth letting you go.

There is no price that would move him to break his commitment to you. He loves you that much. So, how can we become people who are committed to following Jesus unconditionally?

[25 : 57] By looking to the cross and realizing that Jesus is unconditionally committed to us. There is no greater love anywhere in the world than the love that Jesus has for you.

And the more that that begins to embed itself in your heart, the more it begins to change your heart. Because as that sinks in, you begin to rest more and more in the security and in the love and the commitment that Jesus has for you.

You realize there is someone out there who is always for me, who is always with me, who is always encouraging me forward, who is always working for my good, who I can always trust.

And the more you begin to rest in that, the more it frees you to be honest about your failures and your flaws. It begins to free you from that endless cycle of outrage and indignation that comes when we pick up the sword.

Because you start to see yourself as not really being that much better than anyone else. Those lines between good guys and bad guys start to kind of melt away.

[27 : 07] The dividing walls of hostility start to evaporate. You'll stop really needing to take up the sword because you don't really feel the need to defend yourself or to justify yourself or to blame other people.

You're not so afraid of admitting when you're wrong. So you have more courage to admit when you're wrong. So when that person comes to you and says, this really hurt me when you did this or said this, instead of calling and activating the team of lawyers, you simply say, you know what, you're right.

I could see how that would have really hurt you. That was wrong of me to say that. Would you please forgive me? Would you help me learn how to love people better? Thank you for telling me that.

You won't need to defend yourself. There's no sword. You don't need to get it out. You'll have more patience and compassion when people wrong you. Because you know what it's like.

You've done the same thing. I forgive you. Yes. Thank you. And then you become less likely to betray not only Jesus, but the other people in your life.

[28 : 17] Because whatever your price used to be, whatever 30 pieces of silver used to represent for you, you begin to see through it. Because it can't compare.

You look at this little sack of money, whatever that might be for you, and then you look at the cross, and you begin to see more and more and more, this can't compare with that. It can't compare to the love and the commitment that I have in Jesus.

It can't compare. Let's pray. Lord, we thank you. Lord, we thank you. And what can't happen intellectually, what needs to happen in our hearts, we pray that you would do that in the power of your Spirit.

We see all through your Word, and Lord, I just was hearing my friend Rob teach on this this morning, that your Word and your Spirit work together.

And so, Lord, what we hear and receive in your Word now make flesh and blood and bone in us through the power of your Spirit, that we might be people who can love and commit unconditionally.

[29 : 32] I pray that you would soften hard hearts. I pray that you would open closed minds. I pray that you would give us the courage to put the swords away. I pray this, that we would be a people who are distinct, who are salt and light, and a world full of swords and combat.

And we pray this, Lord, not only for our good, but that we might glorify you as a result. And we pray this in your Son's holy name. Amen.