

A Person God Could Not Use

Written by Bob Stone

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I want to describe someone for you.

He was raised in extraordinary times. He had many good aspirations. He went to a great school, where he had a renowned teacher—there was no one better. It was a different kind of a school and yes, his teacher was unique, but the teaching style and content was unparalleled.

He had an opportunity to see fantastic miracles take place, e.g., he was an eyewitness to miraculous events. He was well known, and quoted in the leading religious journal of his day. Even with all these advantages and notoriety, however, he was used by Satan. He was a thief and a liar. He had serious character flaws that were censored by his teacher. He even sold out his best friend for a paltry amount of money. At the end of his life, when he realized how miserably he had failed he did not recover. but became totally distraught. He did not repent, but committed suicide.

You know who I am talking about—Judas, one of the Lord's twelve, a disciple who walked with Him. I believe a study of his life is important, because we in the church have the potential, in a measure, to be like Judas. We all have key moments in our lives when we might follow Judas' lead. The Scripture says, "all have sinned and come short of the glory of God. There is none righteous, no not one." So the key question is how we respond to our failures, to the terrible experiences in our lives when we realize we have blown it.

I have a pastor friend who failed miserably. Let go from churches because of inappropriate conduct, he was publicly maligned and ridiculed and became an example of what we all do *not* want to become. He now, however, stands on the other side of that failure, pastoring again, preaching with great skill tempered with grace, compassion, and a wonderful sense of God's forgiveness. He called me one day from a retreat site where he was fasting and praying. He is restored, with "bruises," but stronger than ever!

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Let's look closely at Judas.

John 12:1-7 tells of how the Lord was anointed with some very expensive perfume by Mary, sister of Martha and Lazarus. We know that as Judas witnessed this event, he objected, saying, "Why wasn't this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year's wages" [three hundred denarii in Greek]. We know that Judas was not concerned with the poor and that he was a thief, because verse 6 tells us so. "He 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."

" 'Leave her alone,' Jesus replied. 'It was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial. You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me.'" John tells us Judas took money out of the money bag, which was the disciples' bank. Jesus' statement was a direct rebuke to Judas, and that may be the reason we find a revealing transition in Matthew 26. After Jesus rebuked him, Judas turned to the enemy.

"Then one of the twelve—the one called Judas Iscariot—went to the chief priests and asked, 'What are you willing to give me if I hand him over to you?'" The key words again are "give me." That phrase characterized Judas' life. He was a man who who clutched for things: maybe notoriety, certainly money, to the point that he sinned against his Lord. Matthew tells us,

"... they counted out for him thirty silver coins. From then on Judas watched for an opportunity to hand him over."

Judas was familiar with all the places the Lord went, so he knew where the soldiers could go and where he could betray his Lord.

Do you see how his heart was revealed? This is a key reason God could not use Judas; he had a weakness that would continue to grow until he betrayed the one he loved, because he did not deal with the sin growing within his life.

Before we talk about that sin, let me point out that Judas was not always a betrayer. There is no hint in the gospel account that he had any less faith and zeal at first than the other apostles (e.g., their first missionary journey). Satan was at work, however, trying to get to Jesus through his apostles. All of them seemed to wrestle with the temptation of pride

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—see Mark 9:33-37; Luke 9:46; 22:24. But Satan scored a huge victory in the case of Judas, apparently through the temptation of greed.

John 12:3 tell us that the other disciples apparently had no idea that Judas was dipping his hand into the group's "treasury." Some secret sins today, in the same way, can be kept secret for a long time. Sometimes even those who know us best—husband, wife, family member, co-worker, close friend—have no idea what is going on.

What is the danger of carrying a "secret sin?" What happens when such sin finally becomes public—as it so often does? Why do we sometimes think we can "get away with it?" We think that if it is concealed in our heart, no one will know. How foolish! This incident with money revealed that unless Judas were to take care of his secret sin, he would find it having long-term consequences on his life.

Luke 16:11-13: "So if you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches? And if you have not been trustworthy with someone else's property, who will give you property of your own? No servant can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money." In other words, if Judas didn't handle his secret sin and obsession with the use of worldly wealth, he was setting himself up for financial loss, and he would not be trusted with true riches. Beyond that, he would have to answer to God ultimately, if not sooner.

Jesus said in Luke 12:1b-5, "Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy. There is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed, or hidden that will not be made known. What you have said in the dark will be heard in the daylight, and what you have whispered in the ear in the inner rooms will be proclaimed from the roofs. I tell you, my friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that can do no more. But I will show you whom you should fear: Fear him who, after the killing of the body, has power to throw you into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him."

What does this say to us today? If we don't handle our secret sin, it will destroy our future. Judas didn't begin with the goal of being a traitor, but after a series of steps and choices, he reached a terrible decision. Listen to this example as your potential or warning. You won't begin with the goal of being a traitor, but after a series of steps and choices, you too might reach a terrible decision. Let me continue to illustrate with Judas' life.

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At the Lord's Supper (Matt. 26:20) the disciples celebrated the Passover together. v. 20—"When evening came, Jesus was reclining at the table with the Twelve. 21] And while they were eating, he said, 'I tell you the truth, one of you will betray me.'"

I want you to think about that phrase in v. 21b. It is actually an appeal—"I tell you the truth, one of you will betray me."

Jesus didn't blast Judas; He appealed to him. He did not violate Judas' will, but respected his right to choose. That's important for us to notice. The Lord does not want us to follow Him like robots, compelled and pushed into a religious mode where we must follow Him and serve Him, forced to live and to die for Him. Jesus wants us to choose to follow Him because we love Him, because it is an act of our own will. He doesn't coerce or push; He appeals.

This appeal is typical of the one Jesus makes to us, too. He tries to get us to stop and think about what we are doing; to ponder the nature of sin, that it lies to us. There is pleasure for a season with sin, but as we move along in it, we tend not to see its consequences. We don't stop and think, "If I do that, then this is going to happen."

I think what the Lord does here is to arrest Judas' attention by saying, "One of you is going to betray me." Some might ask, Did Jesus know what Judas was going to do? Did he have a choice, or was he powerless to prevent his betrayal of Jesus?

Jesus knew beforehand He would be betrayed and who the betrayer would be. Long before it happened, even before it entered Judas' heart to do so, Jesus called the traitor a devil, although not naming him explicitly (see Jn. 6:64,70-71). In Matthew 26:20, Jesus revealed to Judas that He knew what he intended to do. Knowing what a person will do, however, is not the same as causing him to do it. Therefore, Judas still had a choice and was not powerless in the matter.

Is it possible, then, that God could have intervened and stopped him? Since God is sovereign, all-knowing, and all-powerful, He could have stopped Judas from betraying the Lord. Just the same, Jesus could perform a miracle every time He sees us heading for trouble: making a wrong decision or yielding to temptation. He could protect us from every sin, error, blunder, and mistake, but He does not. Instead, He allows us to act as we

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choose—either for good or for bad.

Do you ever wish God would override your free will and keep you from making mistakes? Why? What would happen to your acts of devotion if you could not choose to do them yourself? How would you feel if every time God determined you should praise Him, He stopped you in your tracks, threw your hands up and said, "Praise Me at the top of your lungs."

He does not violate our free will, but instead, gives us examples like Judas and other Bible characters to warn us (see I Cor. 10:11-13) He tells us how to think properly, and gives us good examples to follow (Phil. 4:8-9). He gives us the whole of Scripture to teach, rebuke, correct, and train us in righteousness —2 Tim. 3:16. He gives us one another to help, correct, to pray for, etc.

Having said that, will God warn us in a way that will not violate our free will? Yes, and Judas is an example. I also think we can pray that the Lord would arrest our attention when we begin to go contrary to His will, that He would open my eyes and help me see the consequences of the choices I am making.

Along with this appeal, I believe Jesus helped Judas and us to see how sin would impact Him personally. Matthew 26: 21 says, "...one of you will betray me." As we are committing sin—going along and choosing to do our own thing—we think we are the only ones involved. If for a moment we could see that our sin is ultimately against God and Jesus receives it as sin against Him, we might then wake up.

David woke up after the fact in Psalm 51:4—"Against you, you only, have I sinned..." Certainly our sin is against others, but ultimately it is against God. After Jesus predicted His betrayal, Scripture tells us "[the disciples] were very sad and began to say to him one after another, 'Surely not I, Lord?' Jesus replied, 'The one who has dipped his hand into the bowl will betray me.'

A cultural note is helpful here. For a Jew to eat with a person meant that he was one with that person. That is why Jews would never eat with Gentiles; the Jews and the Greeks didn't have anything to do with one another. What the Lord is saying here then is, "A

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person who is one with Me, a person I eat with, one of my friends, is going to betray me."

"The Son of Man will go just as it is written about him," He said in v. 24. Judas' betrayal was not the cause of the Lord's crucifixion; it was because it was written, prophesied.

"But woe to that man who betrays the Son of Man! It would be better for him if he had not been born.

Then Judas, the one who would betray him, said, 'Surely not I, Rabbi.'"

(By the way, "Rabbi" was a very respectful term.) Jesus answered in v. 25b—

"Yes, it is you."

You see, Judas could fake out all those who were his close associates. I don't believe the disciples fully understood what Judas was about to do (Jn. 13:28-29). They understood in part, but not fully (Jn. 13:26-27). How do you think they would have responded if they *had* understood fully? What do you think Peter would have done? Judas could fake out all the other disciples, but he couldn't fake out the Lord.

That is the nature of sin. We can deceive ourselves or those around us. We can play our secret games, yet the Lord always knows. "Yes, it is you."

The story continues in John 13:27, where says the Lord said to Judas, "Whatever you have to do now, do quickly.' And he left and went into the night."

With that in mind, let's look at another scene in Matthew 26. Jesus went to Gethsemane after the Passover meal (what we call the Lord's Supper). After He prayed for a considerable amount of time, He warned the other disciples about what was going to happen, but they went to sleep. When He returned, He woke them.

"Are you still sleeping and resting? Look, the hour is near, and the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. 46] Rise, let us go! Here comes my betrayer! 47] While he is 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, 48] Now the betrayer had arranged a signal with them: 'The one I kiss is the man, arrest him.' 49] Going at once to Jesus, Judas said, 'Greetings, Rabbi!' and kissed him."

Interestingly, the word "kiss" in v. 48 is the word for a normal kiss of love. What Judas did

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when he got to the Garden of Gethsemane—"kissed him"—was a prolonged and repeated kiss that took place only between very close friends. This has to be one of the most contemptuous kisses in all the annals of treachery.

When you look at a scene like this you probably think, "How in the world could Judas do that?" Some say he saw the resistance mounting and decided he wanted to be on the "winning" side. Others surmise that he was trying to force Jesus to take action and set up his earthly kingdom. Other theories suggest he was disillusioned with Jesus' ministry since it was not leading to an earthly kingdom; or that he wanted to get even with Jesus for embarrassing him when he criticized Mary's use of the ointment.

I believe he was controlled by greed and other secret sins! Jesus replied, "Friend, do what you came for" in verse 50.

We need to understand the nature/capacity of man. We can say the right words, e.g., "Greetings, Rabbi." We can do the right things, e.g., "kiss him." At the same time we can have treachery, denial, and betrayal in our hearts. We can go on like that, in some cases, for a long period of time, but eventually those two worlds will come together. The secret world and the hypocritical world will collide, and we'll have to make a choice about which way we're going to go. Don't be impressed, then, when you are saying the right words and doing the right things. Know your capacity to betray the Lord.

Righteousness (or the lack thereof) is more than right words and right actions. It has to do with the heart, what is lurking there. Everyone agrees Judas' betrayal of Jesus was a heinous offense. It is possible, however, that many people repeat the crime every day.

- Some would say we betray Jesus by failing to say we are Christians because we fear the ridicule of those around us.
- Some would say we betray Jesus by saying we love and serve Him at church, but then carelessly violating His teachings during the week.
- Some would say we betray Jesus by willfully and repeatedly sinning

'Then the men stepped forward, seized Jesus and arrested him. With that, one of Jesus' companions reached for his sword, drew it out and struck the servant of the high priest, cutting off his ear.'" How do you think Judas felt at that point? Can you see him now,

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watching, taking a few steps back? He had seen that look in Peter's eyes before. At that point, he ducked into the shadows and got out of the picture.

The last chapter in Judas' life is written in Matthew 27. "Early in the morning, all the chief priests and elders of the people came to a decision to put Jesus to death. They bound him, led him away and handed him over to Pilate, the governor. When Judas, who had betrayed him, saw that Jesus was condemned, he was seized with remorse and returned the thirty silver coins 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."

What a terrible end of a man who had such great possibilities. When Judas saw that Jesus was condemned, he had a visual reminder of the consequences of his sin and was "seized with remorse," Matthew tells us. The words "seized" has a meaning almost like a bear hug; he was practically captivated by remorse and returned the coins.

Again we have a picture of humanity. We can have our best friends tell us, "Hey, if you keep going this way that's where you're going to end up. I've been there, I know." The best people around us can talk to us, and we will not even acknowledge it. Sometimes it's only when we see the consequences that we turn; that is what happened to Judas.

Notice Judas' confessor, however: a fellow culprit, one who has participated in the sin with him. "I have sinned," he said, "for I have betrayed innocent blood." Great, Judas; wrong person to confess to. He should have walked right into the Sanhedrin's proceedings, found the Lord and said, "I have sinned, please forgive me. I acknowledge my sin." He should have said to the Sanhedrin, "If you are going to take Jesus to jail, take me too. If you are going to crucify Him, crucify me also." If Judas had taken that stance and truly repented, I believe he could have been restored. But he didn't. Not at all.

That's why it is so important when we have been gripped with and deceived by sin, that we go and confess our sins to others. James 5:16 commands, "Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective."

Sin makes us sick, and we need to be healed. We sometimes need the prayer of a righteous person so that we can be healed from that bent, that longing to go the other way.

Conclusion

The lessons here are obvious

1. The terrible thing about sin is, we can't turn the clock back; we will have to face consequences when we deliberately deny the Lord or His Word. Once the deed has been done, it cannot be altered; you cannot take it back. But that doesn't need to be the end of the story. Judas did it the wrong way—Matt. 27:4. He experienced deep sorrow and regret for what he did, but that did not address his real need of confession/repentance to the Lord. He confessed his sin to the wrong group and made restitution to his fellow culprits. "I have sinned," he said, "for I have betrayed innocent blood." "What is that to us?" they replied. "That's your responsibility." He could have been forgiven if he had genuinely confessed and repented.

Peter, on the other hand, when he sinned went out and "wept bitterly" after he denied the Lord, but he continued to be with the disciples. He stayed in community, and received restoration from the Lord.

2. A strange thing about sin is that a person can come to hate the things he has gained by it. Revulsion to sin can be the fruit of true repentance. Other times, God by His mercy can work in and through the repentance and redeem the situation so that He brings something good out of it, e.g., the Apostle **Peter's** restoration and greater ministry.

3. We sometimes believe that repentance and forgiveness are impossible because of the grievous nature of our sin, and that is a lie. Today can be your day. If you are a person God cannot use, bring your repentance and your confession to the Lord and His church. Let us help you be restored to a grace-filled life.

Dear Father, we tremble to think of Judas' destruction. We tremble even more when we realize that each of us could follow in his path. Help us discern the sins in our hearts and cast them out with your help. Refine and increase our faith. Help us to accept your discipline. In Your name, Amen

Application Questions:

1. While they were at Oxford University, John and Charles Wesley were leaders of a support group for Christians, called the Holy Club. At meetings of the Holy Club, the members examined each other with penetrating and probing questions about their personal lives—not to embarrass or humiliate or ridicule anyone, but to provide mutual accountability. If there was a problem, it could be confessed in a safe, non-threatening,

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- and supportive environment of fellow believers. Then they could all pray about the problem. Would you join a "holy club" today? Why or why not?
2. How can we be encouraged to confess and repent of secret sin?
 3. What kind of accountability would be appropriate to help people feel they have a way out when carrying secret sin? (See James 5:13-16.)
 4. What should we do today when we know we have sinned? To whom should we confess it?
 5. Under what circumstances should we make a public statement of repentance?
 6. If you had been one of the other apostles and Judas returned with pleas of repentance, how would you have handled it? Could you have forgiven him? Why or why not?
 7. How forgiving are we of people in the church who fail? How can we be more forgiving—as Jesus forgave Peter for his denials?
 8. What kind of influence do you think Judas could have had if he had repented? What kind of testimony can people today have who have sinned and then come back to the Lord?

Additional notes:

Source used: The NIV Standard Lesson Commentary: International Sunday School Lessons. The Standard Publishing Company, Cincinnati, OH, 1996.