

Midweek 5

“Seized with Remorse”

Sermon Text: Matthew 27:3,4

(Matthew 27:3-4) 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. ⁴ "I have sinned," he said, "for I have betrayed innocent blood." "What is that to us?" they replied. "See to it yourself."

Dear Fellow Christians, there is a progression we recognize in most things. Think here in terms of the familiar “good, better, best” or “unwise, foolish, idiotic.” So also when something grabs our attention there is also a progression. We are first “interested,” then “preoccupied,” and finally “obsessed.” We usually consider “interest” to be healthy – the product of a curious mind, as in “*he has a broad range of interests.*” The picture darkens a bit when it moves to “preoccupied,” and it becomes even more ominous when it turns into “obsession.” Being “interested” in something leaves room for other interests. Obsession typically does not. The focus of an obsession becomes not just a thing but *the* thing, the only thing. Everything else is moved to the background or abandoned entirely.

Interestingly the focus of obsession can be just about anything, from inherently bad things like gambling or drugs to relatively benign things like golf or exercise. The problem is not necessarily the thing over which you are obsessing but the obsession itself – the mental and emotional state of mind, to the exclusion of all else. You can recognize obsession in yourself when it grabs hold of your entire being, so much so that you find it difficult, if not impossible, to focus on anything else for any length of time. Your existence is limited to the object of your obsession.

Guilt or remorse can do that, can become that – that one thing. It can grab hold and block out all else. Like most obsessions, if we are not freed from our remorse (if we do not learn how to be freed from its slavery) it can, will, destroy us. So it is this evening that we seek to learn from one who was not only “**seized with remorse**” but who was ultimately destroyed by it: Judas Iscariot.

The study of Judas is as fascinating as it is tragic. The man remains an enigma. So many aspects of the man are hard, if not impossible, to pin down. The actions described in our text, for example, took place on Good Friday morning, and our natural reaction is, “Really? *Now* he gets it? *Now* he suddenly realizes what he has done? *Now* he suddenly recognizes that he has betrayed innocent blood?”

Judas always knew exactly what he was doing. He had been plotting with Jesus’ enemies for some time. In Matthew’s Gospel we read, ***Then one of the twelve, whose name was Judas Iscariot, went to the chief priests and said, "What will you give me if I deliver him over to you?" And they paid him thirty pieces of silver. And from that moment he sought an opportunity to betray him.*** ^{ESV}(Matthew 26:14-16) Jesus had even specifically warned him in the Upper Room of the evil of his intended betrayal. Later, in Gethsemane, he had clearly articulated to Judas *exactly* what he was doing – that he was betraying the “Son of Man,” the Promised Messiah: ***“Judas, are you betraying the Son of Man with a kiss?”*** When Jesus asked him that, Judas didn’t deny it. He didn’t say, “*No, no, you misunderstand. That’s not what I’m doing.*” Judas obviously knew, already in Gethsemane, exactly what he was doing. His intention was clearly to betray Jesus and to deliver him into the hands of his enemies.

More than that, Judas knew all along that he was betraying an innocent man. Three years of near constant contact with Jesus had made it clear to him that Jesus was not only innocent, he was the *most* innocent man who ever lived.

How is it then that Judas changes his mind on Friday morning, that he is suddenly filled with remorse – literally does a 180 from what he had been plotting for some time? Some have suggested that Judas had this apparent epiphany first on Friday morning because that's the first time he realized what the consequences of his betrayal would be. Up to that point (so the argument goes) Judas had either assumed that Jesus would use his power to escape, or that he would be forced to begin the process of liberating the Jews from Roman tyranny. Jesus would, in other words, emerge unscathed, and Judas would have 30 pieces of silver – and maybe even the praise and gratitude of the other disciples for finally bringing the thing to a head. When Judas saw that that wasn't happening, he had his epiphany. He realized he had participated in a betrayal that hadn't gone at all as he had envisioned it.

That scenario is hard to believe, for several reasons. Jesus had made it very clear to his disciples, on more than one occasion, exactly what was going to happen to him, *and when*. He had told them that *this* trip to Jerusalem would result in his arrest and execution. Every one of the disciples heard what Jesus said and understood what his words meant. Why else would Peter, as the spokesman, attempt to prevent Jesus from going? Why else would he say to Jesus, "***This shall never happen to you!***"? Is it possible that Judas was then just trying to capitalize on the inevitable? Was he reasoning, in other words, that if this was going to happen anyway, why not get something out of it for himself? We simply are not told.

Seek to learn from Judas, but don't pity him. Don't seek to justify his actions. Recognize the evil at work here. Jesus destroyed the notion that Judas was acting in simple ignorance, or that what he was planning to do was really no big deal. He did so with his words in the Upper Room, when Judas could still have opted out of his plan, "***The Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that man if he had not been born.***" ^{ESV}(Matthew 26:24)

Judas gained no new insight into the impact of his actions by the dawn's early light that Friday morning. Everything that happened is what Judas should have expected to happen. More than that, everything that happened is what Judas had been *told* would happen. He did it anyway – which is critical information as we seek to learn and apply all of this to ourselves.

Why then did Judas suddenly change course on Friday morning?

The short answer is that his obsession suddenly changed. He was ruled by a new master. His obsession up until Friday morning had evidently been money. Once he got it, that obsession vanished – only to be replaced by a new obsession, a new master: remorse. That's the way it often is with sin, isn't it. It can consume us. It can become our singular focus to the exclusion of all else. If we can just have that one thing, all will be well. Then, by the dawn's early light, that sin, that obsession, once achieved, looks very different – nothing at all like we had envisioned. Maybe for Judas his "one thing" had been money. Maybe that was the one thing that Judas imagined would make him happy, the one thing that would fill the hole, the emptiness he felt in his soul, and that would finally make him complete. Imagine his bitter disappointment when he finally obtained his obsession, only to have it turn to ash in his hands. In an instant his obsession with money vanished, and he was left with his new "one thing" – remorse.

But this isn't about Judas, is it? The Word of God is always about you and me. You know what it's like to have that "one thing," don't you? It's not always the same thing; it changes depending on the moment and the situation. Whatever it is at that moment, it is the one thing. It's the one thing we need to be happy *right now*. Maybe it's the one thing we need to cope with our current state of affairs. Maybe it's the one thing we need to do to deal with our anger about what someone said or did to us. Maybe it's the one thing we need to finally reach a goal.

Desires like that don't tend to just go away. They just get worse and worse until we are truly obsessed. The one thing becomes our all – all we can think about, all we talk about, the focus of every plan or action. We can actually become convinced that if we can possess or accomplish that one thing, all will be right in our world. It's not that we think it's the only thing in *everyone's* world. We know that our action will have an effect on others, but that doesn't matter because it has become the one thing in *our* world. Only one thing matters – getting that one thing we think we need.

Then comes the dawn. Like Judas, we're left standing there, having done *exactly what we intended to do* and having gotten *exactly what we intended to get*. Like Judas, we look down at our 30 pieces of silver, and ask not "*What have I done?*" (because that answer is easy: I've done exactly what I planned to do) but "*How could I have done this? How could I have done what I have done knowingly – with my eyes wide open, knowing?*" I wasn't confused about what I was doing, what it would cost, or what I would get. If that were the case, at least I could then tell myself that I had made foolish decisions based on inexperience or faulty information. I knew what I was doing. I knew it was wrong even before I did it, and I did it anyway, just because I wanted to.

If we are honest, we know that makes us bad people. Deep down, even though we can hardly bring ourselves to admit it, we know that makes us evil people. We don't like feeling that way about ourselves and the inevitable result is that we, like Judas, are "seized with remorse."

Judas taught us what it looks like when we then allow that remorse to become our one thing, our new obsession. He tried everything in his power to rid himself of his terrible new obsession. He changed his mind. That didn't help. He gave back the money (his previous obsession). That didn't help. In utter despair he did the only thing that he could think of to rid himself of his new fixation; he ended his own life.

Understand the ultimate lesson here. If you ever find yourself in that situation, if you ever find yourself obsessed with your own guilt, shame, and remorse, then know that two possible paths stand before you. The first is the path taken by Judas, which is the path that leads to eternal destruction. The other is Jesus Christ. It is recognizing that God the Father placed upon his Son not only your sins, but every bit of the guilt and shame that you are now experiencing. As he came to suffer for your sins, he also came to carry your guilt to the cross. *Your remorse can survive only as long as your guilt remains*. Don't imagine, like Judas, that your remorse will go away if only you can somehow make yourself not guilty. Judas could not. You cannot. But Jesus can. He already has. This is, in fact, exactly the sort of "care" that our Savior has told us to "cast upon him." This is the heart and soul, the true joy, of the Christian faith.

As you come to terms with your true, real, personal guilt during this Lenten season, the enormity and the shame of what you have done, don't allow remorse to become your obsession. Ignore the counsel of the Pharisees to Judas to "**See to it yourself.**" Know that you cannot. Turn your eyes instead to the cross and recognize it as your Savior's full and complete payment for all. Let that cross be your one thing. Amen.