

The Lessons of Lent – Thoughtless Actions

Everyone makes mistakes, obviously. The idea, so we are told, is to learn from those mistakes, and to “never make the same mistake twice.” You’ve probably heard someone pronounce that as something of a badge of honor: *“Sure, I make mistakes, but I never make the same mistake twice.”* The obvious flaw in that strategy is that even if you only make a mistake once, there are endless possibilities. Is it really all that much better to never make the same mistake twice if, instead, I make every mistake possible, but only once? Aren’t there mistakes that we cannot afford to make, even once?

What we read in God’s Word is designed to *prevent* mistakes, to prevent falling into temptation and making bad choices. It makes sense when you think about it. We really don’t need a warning if our goal is to never make the same mistake twice. Life itself, together with our own natural stupidity, would provide those lessons. Our merciful, loving, Heavenly Father warns us in advance for a reason. His goal for us is that we never make the same mistake once. In other words, since there is *“nothing new under the sun,”* it is likely that every stupid choice has already been made. Life would be a whole lot easier if we could learn to avoid the mistakes that others have already made.

That’s the goal of our midweek services this Lenten season – to learn from the mistakes of others, and to thereby prevent or avoid what those who made the mistakes did not. We will take a fresh look at the familiar Passion History of our Savior to identify the obvious blunders that were made – not to pridefully condemn those who made them but to humbly learn from them, and to avoid what they did not.

We find our first mistake and thereby learn our first lesson in the 22nd Chapter of Luke’s Gospel: ^{ESV}**(Luke 22:47-48) While he was still speaking, there came a crowd, and the man called Judas, one of the twelve, was leading them. He drew near to Jesus to kiss him, ⁴⁸ but Jesus said to him, “Judas, would you betray the Son of Man with a kiss?”**

It’s hard to quantify just how much trouble we could avoid if we would just stop for a minute and think about what we are about to do. This is, of course, an ongoing battle against unseen forces, one of the most common of which is simple human emotion. Two things about emotions. First, they tend to be blind but driven. Think Stevie Wonder, in a hurry, driving a car. Our emotions are also bossy things. They tend to demand not only attention but action, not all of which is bad. You feel sympathy or compassion for someone who is hurting and that emotion might tell you to give the sufferer a hug. You feel pity for someone in need and that emotion tells you to provide the person with what they lack. You feel indignation at an injustice and that emotion compels you to try to right the wrong.

But no one really needs to tell you that not all of your emotions are pure and God-pleasing, nor that the orders issued by those emotions are always helpful or righteous. Envy and greed demand that you take. Pride demands that you belittle. Rage demands that you hurt.

Compounding the problem is the fact that we human beings are particularly good at justifying our own actions on the basis of what we feel, desire, or imagine that we deserve. The rationale doesn’t even have to make sense. People justify stealing from Walmart or insurance companies *“because those companies have plenty of money.”* People turn into wild animals following natural disasters *“because I’m hungry.”* I’m justified in murdering a human being in cold blood because he works for an insurance company and *“I’m mad at insurance companies.”* None of this makes any reasonable

sense at all, but that's exactly the point. If given free rein, emotions are to reason what polar bears are to baby seals. Emotions require the parental supervision of thought and reason. To use a little different analogy, emotions are to reason what handguns are to those wielding them.

Our text for this evening deals with the enigma that is Judas Iscariot. It is virtually impossible to determine, with any degree of certainty, just what made Judas tick. We know that Judas was a thief, since we told as much in John 12:4-6: ***Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (he who was about to betray him), said, ⁵ "Why was this ointment not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?" ⁶ He said this, not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief, and having charge of the moneybag he used to help himself to what was put into it.*** We also know that Judas betrayed Jesus for 30 pieces of silver. Got it. Judas loved money. So was that all there was to it? Was it all just about greed?

A couple of monkey wrenches that get thrown into the machine of this overly simple analysis of Judas when we realize, first of all, that 30 pieces of silver was not all that much money. The modern equivalent would be anywhere from \$340 to \$1,250. Some have argued that that amount of money in Jesus' day was substantial in that it represented a half year of wages, but then we find the other problem in understanding Judas: he tried to give the money back. When? Why?

^{ESV}(***Matthew 27:3-5***) ***Then when Judas, his betrayer, saw that Jesus was condemned, he changed his mind and brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and the elders, ⁴ saying, "I have sinned by betraying innocent blood." They said, "What is that to us? See to it yourself." ⁵ And throwing down the pieces of silver into the temple, he departed, and he went and hanged himself.*** If Judas was nothing more than a thief, if he was just all about money, why would he feel compelled to give the money back once he realized that Jesus was going to be condemned? What did he think was going to happen when he decided to betray Jesus to the enemies he knew were bent on killing him? Knowing Jesus, as he clearly did after spending three years with him, did Judas imagine that Jesus' enemies would obviously find no grounds to condemn him, and therefore saw this as an opportunity to fleece a bit of money from the Scribes and pharisees? In other words, since they were obviously not going to find any fault in the faultless Jesus, did Judas just see this as a clever way to profit from their stupidity? Judas had also witnessed countless miracles during his time with Jesus. Did he convince himself that even if Jesus were wrongly condemned he could miraculously escape?

Here's the real problem with trying to analyze Judas: ^{ESV}(***Luke 22:3-6***) ***Then Satan entered into Judas called Iscariot, who was of the number of the twelve. ⁴ He went away and conferred with the chief priests and officers how he might betray him to them. ⁵ And they were glad, and agreed to give him money. ⁶ So he consented and sought an opportunity to betray him to them in the absence of a crowd.*** Judas had become the devil's puppet, and it is pointless to try to ascribe rational thought to demonic evil. Yet we still try to do that, even today, don't we. We look around, see what people are doing, and somehow try to figure out what they are thinking.

So also we look at Judas and can't help but ask, "*What was he thinking?*" And that's the point. He probably wasn't. And therein we find our first lesson: *Think about what you are doing. Better yet, think before you do; evaluate before you act.*

Lent is the perfect time to perform a comprehensive internal audit – to open every dark closet and cupboard in our hearts and to shine the light of God's Word into every shadowed corner and recess. When we do, we'll always find things that obviously don't belong there, things that need to be thrown out. The one that we identify this evening is our old Adam's continual encouragement to "*Just do. Don't think.*"

It takes brutal honesty, but when you apply that brutal honesty you will have no trouble identifying this evil in yourself. You've experienced it. You've lived it. When tempted, you've heard that new man in you, imploring you to stop and think about what you are considering. Often the battle is very brief, as when we are tempted to say something we know we probably shouldn't. That's undoubtedly part of the divine advice we are given when in his Epistle James tells us to be **"slow to speak."** In other words, stop and think about what you are planning to say.

Yet at other times the battle within is protracted; that is, there is more than enough time to stop to consider an impulse, an intention or plan. More than enough time to rein in that emotional impulse. What does that battle sound like in your head? Everyone here can answer, because you know the answer from experience. The new man within you tells you to stop, to think, to consider. Your sinful flesh tells you not to go there. *"Don't think about Jesus. Don't think about what he has done for you or his will concerning what you do or don't do. Don't think about the fact that God sees all that you do and that nothing is hidden from his sight. Don't think about the unseen holy angels that attend you. Don't think about the Holy Spirit that resides in you. Don't think about the spiritual danger of yielding to sin. Don't think about how ashamed you would be if your fellow Christians saw what you are considering. Don't think about any of this. Just do."*

This is all part of the process that God's Word refers to a **"putting on the new man."** It's that continual struggle to stop and listen to that new man within us. Think of it like the judge in the courtroom that silences the mouthy attorney with his *"Be quiet now. You had your turn. Let him speak. I want to hear what he has to say before I make my decision."*

This is yet another example of why we always want to identify our proper place in every part of God's Word. In our text for this evening, we are Judas, and Jesus is looking intently into our eyes and asking of us, *"Friend, stop and think. Is this really what you want to do?"*

It is foolish to imagine that all of the forces of evil will hold their tongues during these struggles. You will also hear their voices – If you do not focus on your Savior's. You will hear them say that you can just ask for forgiveness afterwards. You will hear them argue that even if what you are considering is a sin, sin doesn't matter because Jesus has already been punished for that sin in your place. They will reason that one more sin isn't going to change anything. And then one more. And one more. And one more. They know that faith alone in Jesus Christ saves, but they also know that sin is the kryptonite of saving faith. It is the one thing in all of creation that can weaken, degrade, and eventually destroy the faith by which we are saved.

So we ask our Savior-God this evening to teach us this lesson of Lent – to teach us to stop and listen to his voice when we are tempted. We ask it of him because we cannot do this on our own, as we can accomplish nothing at all that is good in our lives without him. The friend who loved us so much that he left heaven and came to earth to pay the terrible penalty for our sins, he deserves to be heard, and everything he says can be trusted. Amen.