

Just Off-Center
Matthew 26:20-22
Rev. Dan Schumacher

Why did Judas do it?

If it was for the fame, he succeeded — well, at least at becoming *infamous*.

In his day and time Judas was one of the most popular names for boys. It means “to praise God,” and it was associated with the great Jewish patriot and hero, Judas Maccabees. But if it was popular *before* Judas Iscariot, it certainly hasn’t trended since. I mean, do you know a single person named Judas today?

Growing up, I knew a kid named Jesus — which I thought was pretty bold of his parents. But I’ve never once met a Judas.

And I’ve never seen a St. Judas Church. St. Jude? Sure. St. Judas? Never.

Judas’ reputation is so poor, so toxic that the pastor, John Killinger, tells this story:

“Years ago, when my wife and I saw Tim Rice and Andrew Lloyd-Weber’s rock musical *Jesus Christ Superstar* on a London stage, the cast came down and talked with the audience during the intermission. We met the actor who played Jesus and the one who played Judas, and they told us that they swapped parts every few nights so other members of the cast wouldn’t get to hating them. ‘Before we did this,’ they said, ‘everybody ostracized the one playing Judas’” (“Missing the resurrection,” *The Christian Century*, May 15, 2006). Talk about a historically bad reputation...

Imagine if you did something so deplorable, so heinous that all of humanity decided to stop using your name. Jeffrey Dahmer hasn’t even succeeded at getting people to stop using the name Jeffrey, but Judas has...

So why’d he do it?

There are no clear answers to that question, but there are loads of theories.

The most obvious theory is that he did it for the money. Maybe you’ve heard the phrase, “Follow the money.” It gets thrown around a lot these days as a way of saying, if there’s scandal or political corruption, find the money trail and follow it back to the guilty party.

You could do the same with Judas. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all say that the chief priests gave Judas money for his betrayal, with Matthew alone detailing that it was for 30 pieces of silver. And the gospel of John actually accuses Judas of misusing his position as the treasurer of the group to line his own pockets. Money can be a powerful motivation — especially if you’ve never had any.

Growing up, my family didn't have much money. I remember being dependent on "fourth" generation hand-me-downs. My cousin would get new clothes. His brother would wear them until he'd outgrown them. Then my older brother would get them. And after my older brother outgrew them, I'd wear them — usually threadbare and frayed by that point.

So I understand well the notion that money can provide a powerful motivation. I looked with green envy at the other children's new clothes and wished for all the world I had the money to buy those things, too.

But here's the thing: thirty pieces of silver wasn't enough to make you wealthy. It wasn't going to put Judas "high on the hog," so to speak. We're not talking about a billion dollar pay out, here; not even a million dollar pay out. In modern terms, it seems that those thirty pieces of silver were worth somewhere between three and five *hundred* dollars today. That's not even enough to cover half your monthly rent for a one-bedroom apartment in Colorado Springs.

Was it really about the money?

Henry Fosdick says this: "If, as Matthew intimates, money was the controlling motive, why did Judas, as Matthew also says, at once return the money and commit suicide? There must have been something *deeper* going on in Judas' mind..." (*The Man from Nazareth*, 185).

Something else was stirring in Judas — something *deeper*.

Others have speculated that Judas panicked when he saw how quickly the tides were turning against Jesus. Soaring popularity was giving way to disdain. Maybe Judas saw that he was clearly on the "losing" side and jumped ship to keep from being crucified along with Jesus.

I've seen the crowds turn on someone first hand — and it wasn't about politics or religion, but sports. I was at Mile High Stadium on November 15, 2015 with 70,000 other fans when Peyton Manning was pulled from the game and Brock Osweiler was put in. Manning was set to break four passing records that day when the game started, but played one of the worst games I've ever witnessed. I like to tell people that I watched Manning complete 5 passes that day... but four of them were to the Kansas City Chiefs.

The thing is: at the start of the game, the entire stadium chanted, "Peyton! Peyton! Peyton!" But by the half, the entire home crowd booed him every time he dropped back to pass the ball. They gave the coach, Gary Kubiak, a standing ovation when they finally pulled him from the game in the third quarter. And so we Broncos fans went from cheering our hall of fame quarterback's name to booing him off the field in less than the time it took to play three quarters. I watched people turn their Peyton jerseys inside out for fear of bearing his name any longer.

Fear has a way of doing that to us — of dehumanizing those in its grip and motivating us to focus on saving our own skin. But the problem with this theory is that Judas didn't have to betray Jesus in order to save his own skin. He could have just dropped out of sight, slipped away, severed his ties with Jesus, and disappeared until the fervor of the crowd had subsided.

I personally don't think money or a desire to get ahead of the fallout served as Judas' motivation to betray Jesus. I think his motivation was deeper than that... I suspect his motivation was *theological* — it was based on what he believed about God.

Judas had been deeply influenced by the militant nationalist group called the Zealots. The Zealots wanted to drive out the occupying force of Rome out of their land — and, most importantly, they believed with an ardent enthusiasm God would send a Messiah who would be a supernatural soldier that would lead them to victory.

What if Judas believed Jesus was that super soldier sent by God? What if he was right about Jesus being the Messiah, but was absolutely wrong about who that Messiah was supposed to be?

What if Judas expected the Messiah to declare himself with power and superhuman authority... but then Jesus kept healing lepers, of all people, and saying, "Now don't tell anybody about this... this is our little secret"?

What if Judas expected the Messiah to seize the reigns of government and to usher in a glorious new era... but then Jesus kept saying things like "Give unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's" and "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you"?

What if Judas didn't lose faith in Jesus as the Messiah — but decided he somehow needed to force the issue; to put Jesus in a position where he could not resist revealing his glory? What if Judas decided to put the tiger in the corner, so to speak?

Do you see what I'm saying?

Maybe Judas didn't lose faith in Jesus. Maybe he just never let go of his own idolized version of who he thought the Messiah should be.

We have the same problem, don't we?

We are constantly making Jesus over in our image. Don't believe me? Look at the cover of your bulletin. That's a white, European-looking Jesus — even though we know that Jesus was a man with brown skin from the Middle East. And what we do to Jesus' skin is what we do with his theology, too. We make it look like our theology.

Speaking for his own denomination, the late great Baptist preacher, Carlyle Marney said, "all too often we look more southern than Baptist — and more Baptist than Christian!"

We American Baptists can be guilty of the same thing: sometimes we look more American than Baptist and more Baptist than Christian. If we aren't careful, the vision of Jesus that we hold in our minds looks a whole lot more like Uncle Sam than the Son of God who came to save us.

So what is the lesson we can learn from that traitor, Judas Iscariot?

I think the lesson we can learn is this: it is possible to be close to Jesus, and yet remain very far from him; to walk with him and talk with him, and remain completely unchanged by him.

How is that possible?

The famous preacher George Buttrick wondered why the same sunshine melts wax, but hardens clay.

Oscar Wilde wrote the popular couplet:

“Two humans looked through the self-same bars.
One saw mud, the other saw stars.”

Two people look at an identical scene, but one pair of eyes gravitated down to the grime and dirt, while the other set couldn't help but be elevated to the sublime and celestial.

The reality is that we have a choice as to how we will order our lives. And God wants to be in the center of our lives — not peripheral, but *central*. God wants to be central to the way we think, the way we act, the way we speak, even the way we purchase. There is a reason why the tree of the knowledge of good and evil is in the center of the garden. There's a reason why the Israelites would make frequent pilgrimages to Jerusalem, where the temple was at the center. God has little interest in being relegated to the outer edges of our lives.

I keep thinking of the Princeton student who took a vinyl record of a Beethoven sonata and, as an experiment, bored a hole a half an inch off-center. When he played the LP, the beautiful music suddenly sounded like a litter of wheezing alley cats.

Judas reminds me of that record. He was so bent on his understanding of who he wanted the Messiah to be that he just could not accept the actual Messiah. His mind remained unchanged. His heart remained unchanged. And so his understanding of Jesus was like that record with a hole drilled a half inch off-center — so close, yet so far away.

That's the lesson: it's possible to be a half inch from Jesus, and remain unchanged.

But Judas' story does not have to be *our* story.

Anthony de Mello used to tell the tale of an adventurer who was raised in this secluded town. The adventurer left town, and went and explored places no one had ever been. For years, he was gone — gone so long that people came to believe that he was dead. But one day he returned home, and the people noticed that he seemed so... alive.

The town's people were absolutely smitten by his stories of adventures and quests and the things he'd seen and the places he'd been. And they were smitten by the depth and quality of his being — the transformation that had taken place in him. So they started asking him, "Can you draw us a map to all of the places that you went?"

He said, "No, no, no. Go explore. Go out there. You've got to experience it for yourselves, because that's the only true way to really experience this wildness and this terrain."

But they kept pestering him and kept pestering him for a map. So he finally relented and drew them a map to all of the places he'd gone. And the town's people immediately framed it and put it on the wall. They even started to worship the map instead of actually letting it take them to the terrain of the soul.

You see, there is a world of difference between knowing about the Messiah and knowing the Messiah; between knowing about Jesus and knowing Jesus.

One gives us something nice to look at and to think about. The other takes us on an adventure that brings us back with our soul changed by what we have experienced.

And, like Judas, we are left with the choice: look at the map but never use it or take the map off the wall and get busy living?

Thank God for Judas Iscariot, because through his life, we are warned that it is possible to live a half-inch from Jesus and never be transformed.

May we make a different choice.

Amen.