

JUDAS  
by Lester J. Start  
Undated

Text: Matthew 27: 3 - 5. Resp.R.24. Scripture: Isaiah 43.

The personality of Judas Iscariot stands out as one of the most tragic characters in all history and one of the most misunderstood. How could a man live close to Jesus for over two years and then go out in cold blood and sell him out to his enemies? This is the perplexing question which has never been answered satisfactorily; it seems impossible to think that an ordinary man could do such a thing, and so Judas has been painted as a thoroughly wicked and evil man in an attempt to explain how the betrayal could have happened.

The writers of the New Testament could not seem to paint Judas black enough. John calls him a thief and the son of perdition. The evangelists always add whenever they mention his name, "who also betrayed Jesus". These writers accuse him of being greedy, and eager for money, and indicate that he betrayed Jesus for the monetary gain it involved. Judas was the disciple who kept charge of the funds of the group; he was the one responsible for keeping the small treasury of the wandering group of preachers and keeping the accounts straight. It seems hard to believe that a man like Jesus who could read character so well would entrust such a job with an outright thief, a man who more than anyone else was tempted to rob. And if Judas were such a man who was interested only in getting money, it seems strange that he would attach himself to a wandering group of preachers who had hardly enough to feed themselves. Some have argued that the very nature of Judas' duties in being the treasurer for the organization would lead him to be a money grabber and show that he was a type which could not be trusted. It is a strange thing that the financial arrangements of any religious organization seem to fall under a cloud of disrespect. I have heard in various meetings after the financial and business affairs have been discussed someone say, "Now let us turn to the more spiritual part of our work". There is no need to look down upon what is such a necessary part of any organization, and think that Judas because he held the purse strings was not so good as the rest of the disciples. It does not seem possible that Judas was a thoroughly greedy and grasping man, else he would never have left his home and friends and business for a great ideal; he would never have joined himself to a group of men who never knew the advantages of wealth and luxury. We cannot, of course, whitewash Judas; he fell deeply into sin. But it is to misunderstand him, I think, to say that he was a completely wicked and vicious man. The sins which brought Jesus to the Cross were not diabolical crimes; if we understand Judas, we see that they were the same kind of sins which people like you and me commit today.

Some have tried to solve this perplexing problem of why Judas could betray Jesus by explaining that he was necessary in the divine plan of salvation, that he was predestined to play a certain part in the betrayal of Jesus, and that Jesus sharing the foreknowledge of God knew from the very beginning that he would be betrayed by Judas. By this explanation it is believed that the death of Jesus was determined beforehand and that every act in the terrible drama was decreed in a way that made the sin of Judas a divine necessity. It seems clear that it is God's will to allow evil, for without the possibility of man's choice of evil his good would be of no moral value. To

say, then, that the action of Judas was within the will of God is justifiable if we mean that God foreknew it and allowed it. But there is a difference between what God allows and what God intends. To suggest that it was God's intention that a man in a divine drama should do evil, that he could not do otherwise, makes God a partaker in evil which is impossible, and frees Judas from all blame. If we do not hold this idea that Judas was the agent responsible we have no right to condemn him. The fact that the whole drama of the Crucifixion was known to God from all eternity does not mean that Judas had to do what he did. It means that God knew what men would do. Our doing conditions his knowing rather than his knowing conditions our doing. The murder of Jesus was not the intention of God any more than any other murder in history or any other evil can be said to be the will of God. The Cross means what it means not because an evil deed was necessary to the doing, but that there was a divine deed done in spite of the evil purposes of men. Calvary speaks to us not through those who plotted and schemed to bring it about but through him who hung there, through what he accomplished there and because he who won that victory was the unique Son of God. Let us banish from our understanding of Judas, then, the idea that he was a mere necessary pawn in a game.

If we are not to understand the betrayal as a result of a predetermined plan or the result of a wicked man's insatiable greed, how, then, are we to explain it? First of all we must understand the man Judas. Judas always stood alone; he was the only disciple who was not a Galilean. Thus he was a lonely man tied to the band of disciples only because of his deep faith in and loyalty to Jesus. Judas' zeal was more intense than that of the other disciples in a certain sense, because he belonged to that group of ardent nationalists who burned with a patriotic fervor for his nation. Judas had the narrow intolerant nationalistic spirit which is one of the worst diseases of our modern age, a disease that has brought crippling was upon our civilization. Jesus was a patriot, for to be a Jew meant to be a patriot; all Jews were carefully instructed in learning respect and veneration for their heritage. But Jesus was a patriot in a wider sense; he had seen a wider vision. He did not dream as did Judas of a Roman empire banished and driven into the sea; he had seen his Father's kingdom in which there was neither Greek nor Jew, barbarian nor Roman, nor any division whatever, but all one in a loyal service to God the Father of all. The vision Judas saw was not at all like this one. He saw his Master with power at his fingertips such as no man had ever possessed. He thought of Jesus as the heavenly Jewish Messiah, a Messiah who would do mighty works and wonderful deeds, the Messiah we see pictured in the book of Revelation who as a mighty warrior destroys all evil. It was this idea of Jesus as the Messiah which attracted Judas to him, Judas the patriot, the impulsive, the hot tempered one. This was the kind of Messiah which everyone expected. Jesus himself struggled with the temptation to be such a Messiah when the devil showed him all the kingdoms of the world and promised him power over them.

Judas with this idea of the Messiah in mind was subjected to a long and slow process of disappointment as he followed Jesus for two years and saw no evidence of his taking into his hands the powers that were his as the Messiah. We can almost hear him say: "Why doesn't he get moving? Why does he waste his time healing blind beggars? Why doesn't he use his power? And sweep Rome into the sea and set up the kingdom of his ancestor David? He has the power to do anything; he has only to lift his finger and he would have anything. But all he does is wander about talking about love, saying that he must suffer instead of acting."

And so Judas becoming impatient began to plot how he might force Jesus' hand. His hope was to put Jesus in a position where he could no longer hesitate. He would be forced into giving the signal to the populace of Jerusalem which would make them all rise up and follow him. Judas may have argued in this way. "If he is the Messiah, nothing can hurt him; and if I force his hand and make him act he will sweep all before him. And if he is not the Messiah, the sooner we know the better." But he believed firmly that Jesus was the Messiah; he did not understand what sort of a Messiah he was. And so Judas went to those in power and offered to lead them to his master to see whether he was a king or not. And they paid Judas because they were afraid of this man who had such power, this man Jesus whom all the crowds were following. They paid Judas to lead them to Jesus quietly and in secret for they feared that a revolt would ensue if they seized him from the crowds.

Judas probably had no idea that any harm would come to Jesus; he was sure that Jesus would not let them put him to death. The idea of a victory through the Cross was far from his mind. He did not think that it would ever come to that. Jesus would show his power and authority and save himself and all the people. This is not the action of devilish wickedness as Judas leads the authorities to where Jesus is. It is the story of one who misunderstood completely what Jesus was. He never dreamed that Jesus would let himself be taken, and when he did see how his plans had misfired he was filled with remorse and anguish. This remorse is hard to explain if Judas planned everything out of sheer wickedness. But we read: Then Judas when he saw that Jesus was condemned repented himself, and brought again the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and elders saying, "I have sinned in that I have betrayed innocent blood." The horror of his act filled him with a maddening anguish. He threw down the money at the priests of the temple. But they were not interested in his remorse; they had what they wanted. By their cold sarcasm and contempt, they rejected him. "What is that to us", they said. "That is your affair."

Then Judas, filled with the enormity of what he had done, mad with remorse, went out and destroyed himself. Jesus had called to him- "Follow me". And now Jesus was dead because Judas, never dreaming he would let himself be taken, had brought him to the cross. All he could do was to follow the master he still loved—into the other world, where perhaps they might meet again by another sea, and Judas, the man who failed because he did not understand, might learn to understand Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God

When we understand Judas in this light, we cannot condemn him as a thoroughly wicked man blinded by his own lust for money. If we see him as one who let Christ down because he misunderstood him, who failed without intending to, we find a better explanation and understanding of this great sin which has made the name of Judas synonymous with the worst kind of evil. But, more important, we find in the story of Judas an explanation of a good many of our own sins. Most of us do not deliberately plot to hurt that love of which Jesus is the personification and the incarnation. No one deliberately wants to do wrong for the sake of doing wrong. It is that our desires for something else blind us to the values which we unconsciously destroy; we misunderstand the results of our actions until too late. Our instincts get out of hand and our selfishness grows up in the dark like some insidious fungus growth which springs up in the night, and these make us blind to the laws of love we should follow. Our pride springs up and makes us do things we would never think of doing otherwise. We get in a rut. We say mean,

cruel and impatient words and do thoughtless things, because we forget for the moment how we should act as children of God. In this way we all betray Christ today, by acting in such a way that we betray the principles which he taught us.

The clue to the cause of Judas' great crime is found when we see that he acted as he did because he did not understand. And so we today so often fall short, fail to measure up to what we should be, and are led astray to do the wrong things because we do not understand the significance of our actions. We let Christ down without meaning to. Our impulses get out of hand; our selfishness and pride grow in the dark. We do thoughtless things and say bitter impatient words.

But if we will turn to Jesus even now, seeking the love that restores, then His voice will say to us the word that was said even to Judas - Friend!