

Hopeless Repentance

by Harry Ironside

The story of Judas serves as a warning to those who tamper with God's truth and grace, and highlights the importance of turning to God in repentance while there is still time.

Scripture: Matthew 10:2, Acts 1:25

Topics: "Consequences of Sin", "Repentance"

Description

Harry Ironside delivers a poignant sermon on the tragic story of Judas Iscariot, emphasizing the depth of his betrayal after being a close disciple of Jesus for three years. Ironside highlights that Judas's remorse was not true repentance but rather a regret for the consequences of his actions, leading to his ultimate despair and suicide. He warns that Judas's fate serves as a dire reminder of the dangers of rejecting God's grace and the permanence of one's character choices. The sermon underscores the distinction between remorse and genuine repentance, illustrating that true repentance involves turning to God rather than merely feeling regret. Ironside concludes with a sobering reflection on the eternal consequences of sin and the importance of seeking true redemption while grace is still available.

Transcript

The tragedy of Judas is unquestionably the saddest story of human sin and perfidy ever recorded. That one could be in the chosen circle of the intimate friends and disciples of Jesus for over three years, listening to His teaching, beholding the works of power that He wrought, and observing the divinely perfect holiness of His life, and then become His betrayer, seems almost unbelievable. And yet there the record stands in God's Holy Word and it will stand forever, "Judas by transgression fell, that he might go to his own place" (Acts 1:25).

We know nothing of his early years except that he was a man of Kerioth, for this is really the meaning of Iscariot. Kerioth was a city of Judea located near Hazor, so we learn from this that he was not, like the rest of the Twelve, a Galilean. He was a Judean, and in all probability had a measure of culture and refinement beyond that of the motley group of northern fishermen and villagers who with him made up the apostolic band. Like the others his first public act of obedience to the call of God was in response to the Baptist's preaching of repentance. When the publicans and sinners justified God, being baptized with the baptism of John, Judas took his place among them. He too stepped down into the mystical river of judgment and submitted to the rite which was intended to show that he owned himself a repentant sinner and was now looking for redemption in Israel.

What his inmost thoughts really were at this solemn crisis in his life we cannot tell, but we know he began as a disciple of John, for when Peter called for nominations for the vacated office of Judas he reminded his fellow disciples that, "of these men which have companied with us all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John, unto that same day that he was taken up from us, must one be ordained to be a witness with us of his resurrection" (Acts 1:21-22). The necessary inference is that Judas himself had answered to this and that they had known him from the baptism of John until his terrible defection. We do not have any particulars of his call to be one of the Twelve, but there are several others of the company of whom this is also true. In fact, only in the cases of Andrew and Peter, John and James, Philip and Nathaniel, and Matthew the publican, are we given direct information as to how they came to be numbered with the selected group.

It is noticeable that in the lists of the Twelve as given by each of the Synoptics (Matt. 10:2-4; Mark 3:14-19; Luke 6:13-16) his name comes last and in each instance attention is directed to him by the words, "who also betrayed him," or, as Luke puts it, "which also was the traitor." What a terrible designation to stand for eternity.

I As to the esteem in which he was held by the rest, ere his wickedness became known, it is only necessary to say that he was the treasurer of this little group of itinerant preachers, dependent on the bounty of those who responded to their message for daily bread. He "had the bag" and John tells us he "bare what was put therein." The words imply that he misappropriated a part of the common fund. And yet he was trusted, and even Jesus who needed not that any should testify of men, for He knew what was in man, patiently bore with him through the years of his ill doing when, Gehazi-like, he thought he was covering up his tracks. Not only was he the apostolic bursar, but he had the honorable position of almoner. It was he who was appointed to minister to the poor. On the occasion when Jesus ate the last Passover with His disciples and turned to Judas saying, "That thou doest, do quickly," none suspected what he really referred to. As the traitor passed out into the night they thought he had gone at the Lord's behest to give something to the needy.

To what extent he was sincere when he went forth as one of the Twelve, to preach that men should repent and to prepare them for the manifestation of the King, we cannot say and speculation would be useless. But he was with the rest when they exultingly declared, "Lord, even the demons are subject unto us." Did he question or shudder when the Master bade them not rejoice because of this, wonderful as it was, but rather that their names were written in heaven?

Thomas DeQuincey, Marie Corelli, and other literati have sought to build up a defense for Judas and have even attempted to make a well-intentioned but disappointed hero of him. They even go so far as to intimate that the betrayal was, after all, not a positive act of treachery, but simply the ill-considered but well-meant effort of a live man of affairs to commit Jesus to a course for which He was destined, as Iscariot honestly believed, but which His humility and indecision made Him slow to take. Such reasoning is preposterous and borders on blasphemy, for it impugns the wisdom and obedience of Jesus Himself, who was ever the Father's delight, doing always those things that pleased Him.

Judas never had a true love for Christ. The incident of the alabaster box of spikenard makes that perfectly evident. To Mary there was nothing too good for Jesus, so she took her woman's treasure, the box of precious ointment, and broke it and poured it upon His head, as He said in deep appreciation of her devotion, for His burial, of which she had probably learned while sitting at His feet. But to Judas, and to others who were more or less influenced by him, this was utter waste. With cool calculation he figured that

the ointment if sold would have yielded three hundred denarii, a full year's wages for a Roman soldier or an ordinary laboring man. Cunningly he insinuated that it was wasted on Jesus when it might have relieved much human misery if given to the poor. But it was only to cover up the covetousness of his heart that he mentioned the poor. He was really calculating the use he could have made of so large a sum for his own ends.

Such a man proved to be a ready tool in the hands of a designing and corrupt priesthood. His itching palms would make it easy for him to agree to sell the Lord into their hands for thirty pieces of silver. Did he recall the prophecy of Zechariah as to that, or was he so blinded and had he become so insensate through covetousness that the prophet's words had gone from his memory, if he ever knew them? He probably fulfilled them unconsciously, as he also fulfilled certain prophetic passages in the Psalms, notably, "He that eateth bread with me hath lifted up his heel against me."

Note his perfect self-command and lack of telltale change of color when all were gathered around the table and Jesus informed them that one of their number should betray Him. Judas asked coolly, "Is it I?" and gave no sign of an accusing conscience. Even the reference to the sop and the grace that led the Lord to give him the choice portion left him unmoved as before. He arose from that feast of love and went out -- and it was night. Not only was it night in the natural sense, but it was dark, dark night in his soul, to be unrelieved forevermore. He had turned his back forever on the light. Satan had definitely entered into him. He was under control of the spirit that energetically works in the children of disobedience. Christ's words are pregnant with meaning, "Have not I chosen you twelve, and one of you is a devil?"

It would seem that just as one may yield himself unto God and thus be filled and dominated by the Holy Spirit, so one can hand himself over to the authority of darkness and be controlled by Satan himself. It was thus with Judas. Any qualms of conscience he had ever known were ended now. Any kindly regard for Jesus which had ever held sway in his breast was now forever stifled. Any tenderness of heart he had ever experienced was now changed to hardness like that of the nether millstone. He was sold under sin in the fullest sense. For him there could now be no turning back until his nefarious plot was executed in all its horrid details. The receiving of the money from the wiley priests, the guiding of the mob to Gethsemane's shades, the effrontery that led him to walk boldly forward exclaiming, "Hail, Master!" as he planted a hypocritical kiss on His cheek -- all these tell of a conscience seared and a heart that had become adamant in wickedness.

But even for Judas there came an awakening at last. When he saw how meekly the Saviour allowed them to maltreat and condemn Him his sensibilities were stirred, and although there was no turning to God he regretted his fearful error. I cannot do better than let Matthew himself tell the story:

"Then Judas, which had betrayed him, when he saw that he 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 the innocent blood. And they said, What is that to us? see thou to that. And he cast down the pieces of silver in the temple, and departed, and went and hanged himself. And the chief priests took the silver pieces, and said, It is not lawful for to put them into the treasury, because it is the price of blood. And they took counsel, and bought with them the potter's field, to bury strangers in. Wherefore that field was called, The field of blood, unto this day."

Since Judas repented, was he not forgiven and will he not after all find a place with the blest even though in his despair he filled a suicide's grave? Our Lord's own words forbid any such conclusion. He declared,

when speaking of Judas, "Good were it for that man if he had never been born." This negatives any possibility of salvation for him in another world; for, in spite of the enormity of his guilt, if he ever attained to the joys of paradise it would have been well for him to be born.

The fact is, the Holy Spirit, who selects His words with divine meticulousness, used an altogether different word here, from that which we have been considering, for repentance. It is not metanoia but metamellornai -- not a change of mind which involves a new attitude toward sin and self and God, but "to care afterwards," that is, to be regretful or remorseful. Thousands of imprisoned convicts, guilty of most atrocious crimes, repent in this lower sense. They would give much if they had not committed the offenses for which they are now suffering the penalty of the law, but they have never bowed the knee to God nor confessed their guilt to Him. So with Judas. He acknowledged his folly and wickedness to the callous priests who contemptuously replied, "What is that to us? see thou to that," and then were very punctilious as to the use they should make of the "tainted money" thrown down at their feet. But Judas went into eternity without one word with God regarding his sin or one evidence of repentance unto life.

Remorse is not repentance toward God. It brings no pardon, no remission of sins. It is but the terrible aftermath of a course of persistent rejection of the Word of the Lord, which, while it leaves the soul in an agony of bitter sorrow over opportunities forever lost and grace despised, works no change in the conscience but leaves it unpurged forever. It is in this connection that the history of Judas becomes so important for us. It is God's own warning signal to all who tamper with His truth and grace. To play fast and loose with divine revelation is fatal. Its dire effects abide forever.

There is a soft, easy-going philosophy, much in vogue in our day, that would give men hope of a purifying repentance after death, no matter what state they might be in when life's day is ended. But the case of Judas is the negative answer to all this. Nothing he had ever heard from the lips of the Son of God during those years of intimate association with Him gave the remorseful traitor one ray of hope when he at the last began to apprehend something of the fearful wrong he had done. In his harrowing despair he turned not to God, but sought to get farther away from Him, and rushed out of the world a self-murderer.

Some have fancied they detected a discrepancy between Matthew's account of his death and that given by Peter in the upper room. But the two passages are easily pieced together. Judas hanged himself, probably in the very plot of ground purchased by the priests for the thirty pieces of silver. Suspended from a tree, the bough to which the rope was tied in all likelihood broke and he fell to the ground, rupturing his abdomen, as he did so, so that "all his bowels gushed out." It is easy to visualize the horrid scene.

What an end to the life of one who had been numbered with the Twelve, but what an unspeakably awful introduction to an unending eternity of woe! Judas is somewhere today. He will exist throughout the ages. And never will he be able to lose sight of the face of the One whom he betrayed and of the cross upon which He died. But memory will not cleanse his soul. Though the victim of a remorse that must become increasingly poignant as the eons roll on, his must ever be a hopeless repentance because it is based, not on a sense of the wrong done to God, but of the wretchedness in which he involved himself by his stupendous folly. Byron has written:

"There are wanderers o'er the sea of eternity,

Whose bark drives on and on,

And anchored ne'er shall be."

Judas, not Iscariot, has described such as "wandering stars, to whom is reserved the blackness of darkness for ever" (Jude 13). Those who refuse to turn to God in repentance while grace is freely offered are destined to repent when all hope has fled and they shall be as stars eternally out of their orbit. Created to circle round the Sun of Righteousness, they have gone off on a tangent of self-will, and despite all the constraining power of the love of Christ shall plunge deeper and deeper into the outer darkness, driving ever on, farther and farther from the One whom they have spurned and whose mercy they have rejected. It is an alarming picture, and God meant it to be such, for He would not have any man trifle with sin, but He desires that all should turn to Him and live.

It brings us face to face with what we saw before, that character tends to permanence. Men so accustom themselves to certain courses that they lose all desire to change, even though they may realize their behavior entails misery and woe. Hell itself is but the condition that men choose for themselves at last made permanent. By their own volition they unfit themselves for the society of the good and the blessed; moreover they reject the opportunity for the impartation of a new life and nature by a second birth which would make them suited to God in order that they would be at home in His society; and so there is nothing before them but "everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of his power; when he shall come to be glorified in his saints, and to be admired in all them that believe (because our testimony among you was believed) in that day" (2 Thess. 1:9-10).

It is true that God is love, and that He wills not the death of the sinner, but that all should turn to Him and live. It is equally true that He is light; and sin unjudged and unconfessed cannot abide the blaze of His glory, but must seek its own dark level. Of the lost it is written, "These shall go away into everlasting punishment." It implies, in a sense, a certain voluntariness on their part. Unfitted to abide in the light, like bats and vampires and other evil creatures of the night, they seek, like the infidel Altamont, a hiding place from God. It was he who is reported to have cried when dying, "O, Thou blasphemed and yet indulgent God! Hell itself were a refuge if it hide me from Thy face." Men can sin till, as Whittier so aptly puts it, they "lack the will to turn." For them there may be endless remorse, but no true repentance toward God, and therefore no hope forevermore.

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