

Hands of Betrayal: Judas

John 13:18-30 (NIV)

¹⁸ "I am not referring to all of you; I know those I have chosen. But this is to fulfill this passage of Scripture: 'He who shared my bread has turned against me.' ¹⁹ "I am telling you now before it happens, so that when it does happen you will believe that I am who I am. ²⁰ Very truly I tell you, whoever accepts anyone I send accepts me; and whoever accepts me accepts the one who sent me." ²¹ After he had said this, Jesus was troubled in spirit and testified, "Very truly I tell you, one of you is going to betray me." ²² His disciples stared at one another, at a loss to know which of them he meant. ²³ One of them, the disciple whom Jesus loved, was reclining next to him. ²⁴ Simon Peter motioned to this disciple and said, "Ask him which one he means." ²⁵ Leaning back against Jesus, he asked him, "Lord, who is it?" ²⁶ Jesus answered, "It is the one to whom I will give this piece of bread when I have dipped it in the dish." Then, dipping the piece of bread, he gave it to Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot. ²⁷ As soon as Judas took the bread, Satan entered into him. So Jesus told him, "What you are about to do, do quickly." ²⁸ But no one at the meal understood why Jesus said this to him. ²⁹ Since Judas had charge of the money, some thought Jesus was telling him to buy what was needed for the festival, or to give something to the poor. ³⁰ As soon as Judas had taken the bread, he went out. And it was night.

When I was serving my congregation back in Michigan, we had a Thursday night worship service, much like how we have our Monday night services. It was maybe 20-30 people, sometimes ushers, never any acolytes. We didn't have our normal Sunday morning complement of volunteers. So, as the pastor, I would have to check and make sure everything was done before going home. One night, after everyone had left and I was turning off the lights, I realized that the offering had not been put away. So, I grabbed an envelope and started placing the offering in it when I heard someone call out from the back of the sanctuary, "Hey, what are you doing there, Judas?!" That's what my associate thinks is funny.

But that "joke" kind of scarred me. I'm telling you about it a decade after it happened. The words never left me. I know he meant it as a joke, but I couldn't help but reflect and ask seriously if I was being a Judas. There have been pastors who have used their hands to embezzle offerings to line their own pockets instead of using them as intended to support the Gospel ministry. I wasn't doing that, but I suppose I was capable and have the opportunity to do it. Maybe I wasn't outright stealing, but "stealing" by not giving as much time and effort as I could in my calling as pastor. Am I stealing the congregation's offerings by being lazy? Am I being a Judas?

No one wants to be a Judas. It's a name synonymous with betrayal and stealing. People like Judas have a special place reserved for them in hell - extra torment and extra suffering because he stabbed Jesus in the back and handed him over to a bloodthirsty mob. He used his hands to betray Jesus for money.

When you heard the Bible verses for tonight from John chapter 13, did you start to wonder if you are a Judas? Did you hear Jesus' troubled spirit as he testified, "Very truly I tell you, one of you is going to betray me," (verse 21b) and wonder, "Is that me? Am I going to do that? Did I do that?" Did you mimic the disciples' reaction as they "stared at one another, at a loss to know which of them he meant"? (verse 22) It's not recorded in John's account, but the disciples responded to Jesus' prophecy of betrayal by becoming very sad and saying, "Surely you don't mean me, Lord?" (Matthew 26:22) Is that what you're saying in your head right now, wondering if you're a Judas? Have I used my hands to betray the Lord?

I can say definitively that you were not there on that Maundy Thursday evening, celebrating the Passover with Jesus. After Simon Peter motioned to John and said, "Ask Jesus which one he means," (verse 24) Jesus did not turn and point his finger at you. No, Jesus answered, "It is the one to whom I will give this piece of bread when I have dipped it in the dish." Then, dipping the piece of bread, he gave it to Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot. (verse 26) You are not Judas.

There is only one Judas Iscariot. Only one person who used his hands to exchange 30 pieces of silver for a location and a sign so that people could arrest Jesus. Only Judas Iscariot went behind Jesus' and the other disciples' backs in order to arrange this betrayal. Only Judas handed Jesus over to his enemies and sold him out. As Jesus said, "I am not referring to all of you; I know those I have chosen. But this is to fulfill this passage of Scripture: 'He who shared my bread has turned against me.'" (verse 18) You are not Judas.

So, why then have a sermon called, "The Hands of Betrayal," using a portion of the Bible clearly showing Judas' hands of betrayal accepting the bread meaning that he was going to go through with betraying of Jesus if we're not supposed to see Judas in ourselves?

Jesus states the reason why he is pointing out Judas's impending betrayal. "I am telling you now before it happens, so that when it does happen you will believe that I am who I am." (verse 19) Despite Judas' best tactics of deception, Jesus knows exactly what he is doing and when. Jesus tells the future and fulfills what has been prophesied concerning him. This shows us that he really is the Son of God and God himself, doing things that only God can do. Even in being betrayed, he is still in control as God.

Another reason is, seeing Judas explicitly called out in front of the other disciples' – at their request, no less – does get us to look at our own hands and ask if I am sinning against Jesus. I may not be Judas leading a mob to arrest Jesus in the middle of the night, but have I let Jesus down? Did I pledge to serve him with my hands, that he could trust me to live my life for him in everything I say, think, and do, but haven't? Have I been selfish with the earthly treasures that God has entrusted to me, thinking first and foremost of myself and what I want, and then God secondarily, that I've loved money and stuff more than God? Have I been a poor and foolish steward of the wealth God has given me – no matter the amount? I may not be Judas, but I am a sinner who needs a Savior from sin, who needs their hands cleansed from sin just as much as Judas did.

That's our hands, but they're not the only hands to focus on tonight. Look at Jesus' hands. Knowing whose hands would betray him, Jesus "[dipped] the piece of bread, he gave it to Judas." (verse 26) When John asked, "Lord, who is it?" (verse 25), "Who is the one who will betray you," Jesus could have wagged an accusatory finger at Judas and shouted, "He's the one! He's going to do it! He's the betrayer! He doesn't think that I know, but I know! Get him out of here! Throw him in jail for conspiracy to murder! I can't stand to have this conniving weasel in my presence!" But that wasn't the action of Jesus' hands.

Jesus gave Judas a piece of bread that had been dipped in the dish not done purely to indicate the hands of the betrayer. It was customary for the host to dip this specific piece of bread and give it to someone as a sign of honor. Jesus was showing care to Judas. He wants Judas to recognize Jesus' love for him and to see the sin that he is planning on committing. He wants Judas to repent and turn away from it. Judas is not doomed and fated to be Jesus' betrayer. He can stop and not fall. Jesus' hands are giving Judas the opportunity to change what his hands are planning on doing and to stay with his Savior. Jesus does this in front of the disciples so that they too can confront Judas on his planned sin and hopefully turn him away from it.

Maybe this is where my hands have failed Jesus – not so much that I betrayed him with my hands but that I used my hands to accuse people without the care and love of Jesus who pointed out Judas' sin to lead him to repentance, to lead him away from that sin. Is this why we point out sin in others? Or do we do it to make ourselves feel better that we have not sinned in that specific way, that we take consolation that we are not Judas? Do we see sin pointed out and look around confusedly not knowing what to do, like the other disciples did that night? Kudos to them for thinking that Judas wouldn't go off to betray Jesus and instead thinking he would fulfill his calling as the treasurer of the group, but they had Jesus specifically call Judas out. There should have been calls from them, "Judas, is this true?" "Judas, don't do this!" "Judas, even for this sin, God holds out forgiveness to you!"

Sadly, we know what happened even after Jesus showed his care for Judas' soul. "As soon as Judas took the bread, Satan entered into him. So Jesus told him, 'What you are about to do, do quickly.'" (verse 27) Judas remained committed to using his hands to betray Jesus. In this moment, Judas is falling from faith, becoming an unbeliever, as he refused God's call to repent and Satan entered into him. Later, Judas would commit suicide, no longer believing that God could forgive him for his hands of betrayal.

Judas' story gets us to reflect on our life of repentance. It cautions us not to think that we are above falling from faith and betraying our God. But it also gets us to realize that God is constantly calling us to repentance and forgiveness and calling us to stay close to him.

Jesus' story and the work of his hands did not stop with him handing that piece of bread to Judas. Jesus allowed Judas to do what he was going to do. He allowed his hands to be nailed to the cross. He allowed all that was needed so that he could give his life to wipe away all sins of betrayal, all sins of our hands, even Judas'. Jesus' hands hold out to you that same grace that was offered Judas time and time again.

No matter what our hands have done, whether we think we are a Judas or not, Jesus offers us total forgiveness, all paid for by him, no repayment ever required. We are not Judas. Our story has not ended where Judas' did. Jesus is holding out his hands right now, calling you and your hands to repentance and forgiveness offered only through him. By faith, we graciously receive that forgiveness. Our hands are cleansed by your Passion. Thank you, Lord. Amen.