

Matthew 26:22-25 “Surely not I, Rabbi?”

Nobody picks Judas. If your school was doing a play about the life of Jesus and everyone was trying out for parts, no one would want to play the part of Judas. Playing a villain is fun. Judas is not even a fun kind of bad guy. He’s just sleazy and slimy.

No one names their child after Judas. The shorter version, Jude, is somewhere around #157 on the most popular baby names list. But Judas isn’t even on the list. Doesn’t make the cut. Fun fact: the names of all my brothers and sisters, even my parents, all start with the letter J. So as my parents were running out of options when they were expecting my youngest brother, when my dad was particularly stressed and put on the spot about name options, he sarcastically blurted out, ‘Well, if it’s a girl, we’ll name her Jezebel; and if it’s a boy, we’ll name him Judas.’ Those would be the last choices from a listing of biblical names.

It’s hard to be sympathetic toward Judas. We just don’t get much insight into why he did what he did. Earlier in Matthew 26 we learn that Judas went to the chief priests and agreed to hand Jesus over for 30 silver coins. But what was Judas thinking? Why did Judas do it? It’s the question that has gone unanswered for hundreds of years. We can guess. Maybe it was just pure greed. Maybe it was his disappointment over who Jesus turned out to be. Maybe Jesus didn’t quite deliver on his expectations for the Messiah. Maybe Judas even reasoned that Jesus could find a way to come out on top even after his betrayal. Jesus could devise a great counterinsurgency plan to dramatically overcome the plots of the chief priests. That way he could make an unmistakable claim for universal and unanimous recognition. All people would claim him as their Lord. Maybe.

But even if we could figure out why Judas had agreed to betray Jesus for 30 silver coins, how do we explain this exchange with Jesus in Matthew 26? Jesus drops the bombshell: **“Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me.”** (Matthew 26:21) The disciples fall all over themselves distancing themselves from this prediction. No way it could be any of them. Not me. Not me. Not me. None of them could fathom doing anything remotely resembling what Jesus just said.

But Judas knew. Judas had to silence the coins clinking in his pocket. He had taken the time to visit with the chief priests. He had already worked out some possible scenarios to make good on his agreement. He wasn’t oblivious. He was deceitful. He couldn’t have even convinced himself his fake shock and surprise were genuine: **“Surely not I, Rabbi?”** (Matthew 26:25 NIV84)

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Lying and deception is not really about a rational cost-benefit equation. Not that people are weighing the advantages of deception against the risk of getting caught. Rather, it has more to do with the Fudge Factor. It’s not so much about what I can get away with or how likely I will get caught. It’s more about the intricate balance between wanting to have a little bit more and wanting to still think we are good people. What I am willing to do to get what I want right now and still be able to look at myself in the mirror and think I am a good person. Take speeding for an example. If the speed limit is 65, I can tell myself I am not breaking the law if I drive 68 or even 70 miles per hour. We have this ability to rationalize our behaviors. Under interrogation, we would admit that we have done something wrong. But we reason that it is ok and that we can come up with a good explanation for why we did it.

The other disciples were in denial. Judas outright lied. How could he still see himself as a good person? Just the same way we tell ourselves we’re good Christians for coming to church, but then reserve the right to be judgmental and critical the rest of the week. The same way we can profess dedication to God, but keep God’s Word in one small compartment of our lives and only bring it out when it’s convenient in non-threatening situations. The same way we smile at friends and then criticize them behind their backs. The

same way we convince ourselves we are kind, but only to the people who have already been kind to us. The same way we tell ourselves we are generous, as long as it doesn't require sacrifices we can actually feel. The same way we care about the eternal destiny of the unbelieving people we care about, but not enough to speak up and share our faith with them.

Judas tried to have it both ways. He wanted to be a disciple of Jesus with all the benefits of belonging, associating with greatness. But at the same time, he didn't want to say no to his most basic instincts. The disciples were too focused on themselves. They don't ask who Jesus means. They just speak up to establish their credentials. Notice the way disciples today approach this season of Lent. We embrace the indulgence, but we reject the discipline. We keep the feasts and shrug off the fasts. I'm no Judas. But in reality, I'm no better.

Here's a better question. What was Jesus thinking? Why did he even reveal his betrayal if he knew all the disciples would deny it? Even Judas? I mean, isn't that the benefit of being a good spy? Once you figure out what the enemy is planning, once you know their next move, you can outsmart them. You can outmaneuver them. You can avoid the trap.

But Jesus knew he would be betrayed. Jesus knew Judas was going to do it. Jesus even knew the consequences. Jesus understood how horribly it would go by the logic of any of his disciples. And Jesus still fell right into the trap. Jesus let Judas go. Never stopped him. Never talked him out of it. Never prevented him from leaving. Didn't detain him until the threat had passed. What was Jesus thinking? Why did he do it?

Jesus did it for every betrayer. Jesus did it for every betrayal. Jesus knows that you can look yourself in the mirror and tell yourself you're a good person. But Jesus sees you through the lens of his perfect law and sees more than a perfectly flawed person. Jesus sees you as the person you really are. The person who tries to play both sides. Wants to be a disciple, but doesn't want the full burden, the complete cost. Jesus knows everything you want that puts you at odds with his perfect will. Jesus knows your excuses and rationalizations. Jesus knows none of that is good enough. That's why He did it.

And yet Jesus reached out to Judas. Jesus gave him an opening. Jesus gives the opportunity to come clean for all those who ignorantly show themselves to be self-centered disciples. Jesus reaches out to disciples who are so focused on maintaining their own innocence, they fail to hear the warning of Jesus. He speaks up for those who are blind to their own subtle acts of betrayal to their Lord. He gives a chance to the arrogant filled with their own defensiveness. Those who are so preoccupied with their own performance. For even the most brutal betrayers, Jesus gives the opening to come clean. To humbly admit what we are. To see his deep love for us reaching out to us. To understand he cares too much about us to let us go our own way and face the consequences. So that through all the defensiveness and denial, all the lies and rejection we can see Jesus going ahead. See Jesus fully conscious of what lies before him. See Jesus walking into that trap because it is the only way betrayers of all ages can be forgiven.

Jesus knew the plan before him. Jesus knew what it would cost him. But it was necessary. For him. For you.

Why do we have these questions? Why does Jesus ask his disciples some of the questions we will focus on over the next few Wednesdays? Why does Scripture record questions by disciples? Why do we have a record of the sinister interrogation by the chief priests? Why does the Bible preserve for us the dismissive responses of Pilate?

No one wants to see himself as Judas. But by these questions we can place ourselves in this history of Jesus' passion. We can peer into the events from our perspective and gain a better appreciation of Jesus.

Jesus knew the plan. Jesus was committed to carrying out everything necessary for your salvation. Jesus understood his betrayal and the one who was responsible for it. And yet Jesus never gave up on him. Jesus held out hope until the end. Jesus did it for the worst of betrayers. Jesus went through with his suffering and death for the most oblivious disciples. So you and I can marvel at his amazing grace, 'surely not I, Rabbi?' becomes 'How could this be for me?' Amen.