

Betrayal in the Garden

Matthew 26:36-56

How could Judas do such a thing? How could he betray his teacher, his master who had sent him out to preach the gospel and to do miraculous works of healing? Even if Jesus hadn't been the Messiah, would anyone deserve such treatment at the hand of a friend? Does anyone deserve to be betrayed with a kiss?

Yes, Judas rightfully deserves to be despised and derided, to have his very name used as a synonym for "traitor." But the sad truth is that Judas isn't the only one who betrayed Jesus in this passage, is he?

Think, for example, about the chief priests and the elders who sent Judas and the crowd into the Garden. Of all the people who came into contact with Jesus, they, the religious leaders of God's people, should have seen most clearly that He was, in fact, the Messiah.

For they had not only heard His words of gracious authority. They had not only seen His miracles of healing. No, they were rightfully renowned for their knowledge of the Law and the Prophets, the Old Testament Scriptures which Jesus' life and ministry so clearly fulfilled. They knew what the Bible said about the promised Messiah, but instead of bowing the knee to their sovereign Lord, they betrayed Him. Jealous of their own power and prestige, they dispatched their minions with swords and clubs to capture Jesus as one would arrest a common thief.

But they weren't the only ones to use violence in the Garden, were they? Verse 51 tells us that one of Jesus' own disciples had a sword, and struck out at one of the people in the crowd. Both the religious leaders that were hostile to Jesus and the disciples who claimed to be loyal to Jesus were thus ready to use force to advance their beliefs about Christ. And from the time of the Muslim conquest to the Crusades to the Spanish Inquisition to the Salem witch trials, to the modern practitioners of the "cancel culture," all sorts of people have followed their example, trying to compel others to believe certain things.

But how can you possibly force anyone into the Kingdom of God? Sure, you can make people behave, but you can't make anyone else believe anything. Imagine, for example, someone holding a gun at your head while saying "trust me." It's ridiculous – the employment of violence positively precludes the giving of trust. Force is thus the very antithesis of faith.

So why did the disciples try to bring in the Kingdom at the point of the sword? Well, it could be for the same reason that the religious leaders sent a great multitude to arrest Jesus – it could be because they were afraid. After all, if the religious leaders were afraid of losing the respect and admiration of the crowds, so when the disciples were confronted by an angry mob bearing swords and clubs, they were ready to fight in fear for their very lives.

On the other hand, it could be that the disciples employed force out of frustration. For remember, they had been waiting for Jesus to reveal Himself as Messiah and establish His kingdom, thus placing His followers in positions of power and influence. But He kept refusing to do it, even in the Garden, even when the mob had seized Him. So, because the disciples were grasping for worldly power, it was easy for them to resort to military means to achieve their ends.

Well, how about us? Where it comes to doing the Lord's work, do we ever find ourselves employing strong-arm tactics? Do we ever allow our frustrations or our impatience to boil over at fellow believers when they don't agree with our ideas or share our priorities? Do our fears of embarrassment or failure ever cause us to lash out in anger, forgetting that the God Who permitted Himself to be arrested is still in charge, even in the most desperate, hopeless cases?

No, we Christians must never betray Jesus, either by overtly turning our backs on Him, or by resorting to force or compulsion to make others believe in Him. Instead, we must remember that we are in the truth business and in the trust business. Our job is to tell the good news and encourage people to trust Jesus, not to berate them or belittle them if they reject Him or choose to turn away from Him.

And the irony is that on that very night Jesus had given His disciples so many reasons to trust in Him – if only they had stayed awake long enough to listen to His prayers.

Now, we have to admit that Jesus' prayers in the Garden are hard for anyone to understand. Remember, the disciples were expecting a self-confident military leader, a Messiah who would drive out the Romans, a Son of David who would reign over an earthly kingdom in Jerusalem. They were prepared to fight for that sort of Messiah, to be soldiers in His revolutionary army. But to hear Jesus cry out in prayerful agony, to see Him meekly surrender to the mob – none of that made sense to them.

But even though we know what kind of Messiah Jesus came to be, His prayers in the Garden are still baffling, as they place before us the eternal mysteries of the Trinity and the Incarnation. After all, we know Jesus is the Son of God. We know that He is truly divine. But how can God pray to God? And how can God surrender to God's will? Jesus' prayers in the Garden make your head spin.

But at the same time, it's obvious that Jesus wanted His disciples to see Him wrestle with the Father in prayer – that's why He specifically asked Peter, James, and John to go with Him and to watch and pray with Him. So, what did He want them, and what does He want us to learn from such an amazing scene?

At the very least, Jesus' prayers should prove to us that He knew exactly what He was getting into, that He understood the nature of the cup of suffering He would drink. For this cup didn't just include physical pain and anguish, great as His agony would be on the cross. And this cup didn't just include rejection and loneliness, even though all of Jesus' close friends would abandon Him to His cruel fate. And this cup didn't just contain public humiliation and scorn, as all of His own people would turn on Him and scream for His blood.

No, this cup was nothing less than the cup of God's wrath, the righteous anger that all the sins of all the people in all the world so richly deserve. So, for Jesus to drink this cup, He would have to stand in the place of all His people, absorbing all of God's fury that our rebellion against Him has earned. For Jesus to drink this cup, God the Father would have to turn His back on God the Son. For Jesus to drink this cup, the perfect harmony within the Godhead would somehow have to be disrupted; the very essence of the Trinity would in some mysterious way be torn. The God who created life, the God Who is Life would in some way lose His life on the cross. The God Whose holiness is perfect would somehow take on Himself the stains, the guilt, the impurity of all our sin. That's what drinking the cup meant for Jesus.

But there's an even greater mystery here. For if we cannot possibly grasp the concept of the Trinity, and if there's no way we can wrap our sinful minds around the horror that drinking the cup of God's wrath would mean for Jesus, we have no problem at all understanding the sort of people for whom Jesus would endure the agony of the cross.

I mean, just look at Peter, James and John, Jesus' closest friends. Now, they may not have been able to hear, much less understand everything that He was saying as He prayed. But it must have been obvious to them that He was in some sort of serious distress. So you'd think that the least they could do would be to pray for Him, as He asked them to do. But in their sorrow and their confusion, all they could manage to do was to fall asleep. And when worst came to worst, instead of sticking with Jesus, they, along with all the other disciples, ran away. Some friends they were.

But we aren't much different, are we? For how often do we take the trouble to even think about, much less appreciate, the agony Christ went through for us? No, we Reformed Presbyterian types don't have crucifixes in our worship spaces for fear of idolatry, and reasonably so. But as a result, do we let the suffering of the crucified Christ slip from our attention? And when we forget the great sacrifice Jesus made for us, is it any wonder that we tend to tolerate the ongoing sin in our lives that He paid such a high price to wipe away?

More seriously, how do we respond to God when we encounter the sort of confusion or disappointment or fear that the disciples faced in the Garden? What do we do when our own plans don't work out, when our fondest dreams are shattered, when the course of our lives takes a painful or confusing turn? Do we do what Jesus said, and turn to God in faithful, fervent prayer? Do we do what Jesus did, trusting His Father no matter what? Or do we

abandon Him as well, withdrawing from God, nursing our despair and discouragement, indulging in self-pity, drowning our sorrows in entertainment or sleep, in sex or booze or pills or something even worse?

And how much less excuse do we have than the disciples had! For even though Jesus told them what was going to happen, they never really understood the extent of God's plan until after Jesus rose from the dead. But we already know how the story ends. We know what Jesus would go through in the next chapter. We know about the scourging and the nails, the hot anger of the crowd and the cold of the tomb.

And in the Garden Jesus knew all of that too – He knew exactly what was going to happen to Him. And yet even as He trembled at the prospect of becoming a sacrifice for the sins of His people, and even as He saw just how selfish, how fickle, how clueless were those very people for whom He would pour out all of His blood on the cross, the amazing truth is that He did it anyway.

And this may be a miracle more wondrous than the Trinity, more mind-boggling than the Incarnation. For as great as Jesus' humility was in the Garden, submitting Himself to do His Father's will, and as great as His humility was on the cross, as He allowed Himself to bear not only God's wrath but also the viciousness and the spite of His own people, the amazing truth is that Jesus chose to go through all of it – for those who didn't even come close to deserving such a sacrifice.

Why would Jesus do such a thing? After all, if Jesus were like us, wouldn't He have responded to the indifferent cluelessness of His sleeping disciples with condemnation, with righteous anger? If Jesus were like us, wouldn't He have tried to use force to whip them into shape? And when all His disciples ran off and left Him, wouldn't He have just written them off?

But the good news is that Jesus isn't like us. No, even in the midst of His greatest suffering and agony, He was still concerned that His disciples would face their own temptations in a godly way. Even as He wrestled with God in a prayer so intimate, so intense that we can't begin to understand it, Jesus still took the time to encourage His disciples to pray. He was still thinking of them more than He was thinking of Himself.

And that selflessness, that concern for others that Jesus displayed in His gentle reminders to His disciples to pray, that is the clue to the greatest mystery of all – the love of Christ. For that love is the reason why Jesus took His disciples into the Garden to hear His prayers. And that love is the reason that Jesus surrendered to the mob instead of trying to use force to spread the gospel. And that love is what eventually led Him to the cross.

So no, Jesus doesn't expect us to understand the theology of the Trinity and the Incarnation. He just wants to make it very clear to us that He knew exactly what He was doing, the depth of the pain and anguish He would go through for our sake.

At the same time, He wants to make it plain that He knows how cold and indifferent our hearts are towards Him, but that He's willing to go to the cross for us in spite of that sin – no, because of that sin. This is the amazing truth that we find in the Garden: Jesus knows we don't love Him like we should, but He loves us anyway. Jesus knows we keep running away from Him, and yet He pursues us anyway. And if He would go through all of that, through blood and sweat and death itself for us, why in the world shouldn't we trust Him? Why shouldn't we believe in His amazing, unconditional, self-sacrificial love? And why shouldn't we just as patiently and peacefully share that truth and that love with everyone, even those who look and act like they don't deserve it?