

Facing Our Sins  
Matthew 27:1-10

It was wrong. And you knew it was wrong. But you did it anyway. Maybe it was a little thing – sneaking a peek at Susie’s test paper, snagging a pack of gum from Johnny’s backpack or sharing credit for a group assignment that you didn’t really participate in. Or maybe it did real damage – repeating gossip that hurt someone’s reputation or stealing the affections of someone’s boyfriend or girlfriend – or husband or wife. But what do you do afterwards? How do you live with yourself?

That’s the question that faced the chief priests and elders. Now, make no mistake. They really believed that Jesus was guilty. Because He claimed to be the Messiah and the Son of God, they thought He was a blasphemer, setting Himself up in the place of God. And according to the Law of Moses, such a person was supposed to die: “The one who blasphemes the name of the LORD shall surely be put to death; all the congregation shall certainly stone him.” – that’s what Leviticus 24:16 clearly says.

Except that’s not at all what was happening, was it? No, all the people of Israel weren’t rising up in righteous condemnation of Jesus, publicly rejecting Him for His obvious and flagrant sins. Instead, the leaders of God’s people had sent a mob to arrest Jesus under cover of darkness. As Jesus Himself pointed out in the Garden, they hadn’t dared to confront Him in the light of day – He was too popular, too respected. So in order to locate Him and identify Him, they had resorted to conspiracy, paying off a friend of Jesus to sell Him out. The whole thing was so underhanded, so sordid.

Yes, they knew it was wrong. That’s why they didn’t put the money that Judas returned to them into the Temple Treasury – after all, God’s Law made it clear that only unblemished, holy offerings were to be presented to God. In fact, Deuteronomy 23:18 specifically says that the wages of a prostitute were not to be brought into the House of the Lord – and by calling the money they had paid to Judas “the price of blood” they were putting those thirty pieces of silver in the same category – impure. Unclean. But since they had paid Judas that money in the first place, what did that say about them?

No, they didn’t want to think about that. And so instead, they did what we do all too often in the face of our own guilt – they sought to justify their actions to themselves, if not to anyone else. And as we all know, such rationalizations can take lots of different forms.

Of course, the religious leaders started out by simply trying to shift the blame onto Judas: “What is that to us? You’re the one who sold out your friend. Sorry you feel so bad, but see to it yourself!” But of course, such callous indifference can only go so far – after all, they were the ones that paid Judas to betray Jesus. If he had blood on his hands, so did they.

And so, the leaders tried a different tactic – arguing that the ends justify the means. Maybe the money they had paid Judas was unclean, and maybe they shared in his guilt. But they would use the money to buy a field so that poor people could have a decent burial – that was a good thing, wasn’t it? And after all, Jesus got what was coming to Him – anyone who claimed to be the Son of God deserved to die, didn’t He? Didn’t their intentions justify their conspiracy? Didn’t the results of their actions somehow make paying blood money to a traitor okay?

But if the chief priests and elders tried to salve their consciences with the same sort of flimsy excuses we employ all too often, things weren’t so easy for Judas. For if the chief priests had paid him

off, Judas was the one who had gone into that garden. Judas was the one who had pointed out his teacher and friend to the mob – in fact, he had betrayed Jesus with a kiss.

Now, we don't know all of Judas' motivations. But Matthew tells us that once Jesus was condemned, once it became obvious that the religious leaders were going to put Him to death, Judas realized the enormity of his crimes. In fact, the King James Version says that he repented. And surely that's what he should have done – after all, repentance is a good thing, right?

Well, unfortunately for Judas, the word translated as “repent” in verse 3 is not the same word used in the rest of the New Testament for the kind of repentance that leads to salvation. No, that kind of repentance involves both a turning away from our sin and a turning back to God. It is thus a profoundly relational word, describing a shift of one's focus away from the self and towards the Savior.

In contrast, the word used in verse 3 simply points to a change of mind or perspective, not to a change in the purpose or direction of one's life. Instead of looking outward or upward to anyone or anything else, it thus remains focused on the thinker's own deeds or attitudes. Such a change of mind without a change of heart can thus lead us to regret or remorse – but that's where it leaves us.

And that's where it left Judas as well. Oh, he tried to do the same thing that those callous, smug priests and elders had done. He tried to throw off the blame for his crimes as he threw the money they had paid him back into their faces. But while they could easily pin their guilt on him, who was he going to blame for his treachery? For even if he no longer believed that Jesus was the Messiah, he couldn't shake the fact that Jesus hadn't done anything deserving of the death penalty. In fact in verse 4 Judas went so far as to say that Jesus was completely innocent.

But remorse without repentance left Judas with no options. He had lost faith in his own judgment but refused to trust in a Messiah Whose mission he could not understand. He had come face to face with his own guilt, but had no Savior in whom to trust. And so, with a past he could not face and a future that held no hope, he took his own life. In fact, Luke tells us that he killed himself in the same field that the chief priests and elders ended up buying with the money that they had paid him – it was a field of blood indeed.

But even that wasn't the end of the story. For remember: our rationalizations are only helpful to the extent that they are based on truth. Oh, the religious leaders may have thought that Jesus got what was coming to him when they paid Judas those thirty pieces of silver. And they may have thought their own consciences were clear when they bought the potter's field as a place to bury the poor. But in both of those actions they were sealing their own fate. For everything they did was predicted in the very Scriptures of the Old Testament that they claimed to know so well.

Look again at verses 9 and 10. Here we find quotations from Zechariah chapter 11, a chapter which describes Zechariah acting out God's judgment on His people. Zechariah takes on the role of the shepherd of a flock whose owners are raising them for meat. Because the prophet finds himself at odds with the other shepherds of the flock, he angrily dismisses them from their positions. Finally, he rejects the sheep themselves, saying, “I will not feed you. Let what is dying die, and what is perishing perish” (11:9). God says that, in the same way, He “will no longer pity the inhabitants of the land” (11:6).

At the end of the story, when Zechariah had become thoroughly disgusted with the owners, the shepherds and the flock itself, he demands his wages – thirty pieces of silver. And God tells him what to

do with the money: “The Lord said to me, ‘Throw it to the potter’ – that princely price they set on me. So I took the thirty pieces of silver and threw them into the house of the Lord for the potter” (11:13).

What does all this mean? By setting a bounty of thirty pieces of silver on Jesus, and by paying that money for a potter’s field, the chief priests and elders were, however unconsciously, reenacting Zechariah’s prophecy and thus identifying Jesus as the Shepherd of God’s people. And in pushing Him away, they were, again however unconsciously, admitting that they were at best undershepherds worthy of being fired – and at worst, the owners of the flock whose only intention was to devour the sheep. So when they hired Judas and when they tried to distance themselves from his crimes, they were acknowledging and fulfilling God’s judgment on themselves, the judgment they deserved for rejecting and betraying the Shepherd of God, the Lord’s Messiah.

So, since the quotations in verses 9 and 10 come from Zechariah, why does Matthew cite Jeremiah instead? Because of an encounter Jeremiah had in chapter 19 of his prophecy with the elders of his own generation. For Jeremiah took a potter’s earthen vessel, some sort of ceramic bottle or flask, and used it as an illustration of God’s judgment. Because God’s people had turned away from Him to worship other gods, because they had filled the city of Jerusalem with the blood of the innocents, God said He would “cause them to fall by the sword before their enemies and by the hands of those who seek their lives; their corpses I will give as meat for the birds of the heaven and for the beasts of the earth. I will make this city desolate and a hissing; everyone who passes by it will be astonished and hiss because of all its plagues” (19:7-8).

And after Jeremiah pronounced these solemn words of judgment, he broke the potter’s flask and said, “Thus says the Lord of hosts: ‘Even so I will break this people and this city, as one breaks a potter’s vessel, which cannot be made whole again’” (19:11). That’s the judgment the chief priests and elders were bringing on themselves through their very efforts to assuage their own feelings of guilt.

Yes, the elders should have heeded all these warnings from the Scriptures that they claimed to know so well. At the very least they should have agreed with Judas that Jesus was innocent and released Him. But instead, verses 1 and 2 confirm that they sent Jesus to Pilate to be crucified. Both Judas and the elders thus fully and finally rejected the only One Who could truly relieve them of their guilt.

So, what about us? How do we deal with the reality of our guilt? What do we do in those quiet moments, those times when we can no longer escape the regrets and the remorse? Do we try to make excuses? Do we try to rationalize away what we’ve done or left undone? Do we surrender to despair?

There is another way. For remember: everything that happened to Jesus, even the denials and the betrayals of His worst enemies, could only serve to fulfill His Scriptures, to accomplish His perfect purposes and plans. And the good news is that those plans included the very Cross to which His enemies sent Him, the Cross which paid the penalty for all the sins of all His people throughout all the ages. Even though neither Judas nor the chief priests nor the elders believed in Him, everything they said and did only served to make it possible for us to hear and to heed the call from our responsive reading today:

“Seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near. Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts: let him return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on him, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.”

So let us put aside all our rationalizations, our attempts to justify ourselves. And let us move beyond mere remorse, the despair that so easily springs from our guilt. Let us instead pray for the grace truly to repent, to turn away from our sin and toward Christ, to accept Christ’s pardon and experience the abundant life only He can provide.