

Title: Failure does not have to be final
Text: Matthew 26.14-35
Theme: Betrayal, Desertion and Denial
Series: Matthew #118
Prop Stmtnt: Bitterness and self-reliance betray those who give in to them, but the grace of Christ is incredibly rich and sweet.

Imagine that you are a 3rd grade boy. You live for recess. You and your buddies play hard. It might be tag, soccer, or football. It doesn't matter, you love 'em all. But on this day, something happens. You are running, when all of a sudden you start coughing and wheezing and you can't stop. Your friends stop laughing when your face turns red and you get a look of fear in your eyes. You feel like you can't breathe and you start to panic. Then you remember, your inhaler! Every day your mom makes sure it is in your pants pocket. You almost forgot. You pull it out and you breathe in, and what happens? It works. You calm down. You rest.

Beloved, there are plenty of reasons for you to panic. Some of you are dreading the doctor's appointment you have. Others of you have an unresolved family matter that is keeping you awake. Some of you have a situation at work that may cost you your job. Some of you have a project due, a decision to make, a situation that you have to face. But, just because your world is all wound tight, doesn't mean that you have to be. This morning, I want you to see the Bible for what it is. God's Word is our inhaler. When we breathe it deeply, we calm down. This morning I invite you to breathe deeply the Word. The panic of your world does not mean that you have to panic. The calmness of your soul will be sweetened by the depth of your breathing. As we read, let's breathe deep. The text we are looking at this morning is heavy, yet hopeful.

Read Text:

We know from the beginning of this chapter that plotting, conniving, and conspiracy are all going on against Christ. We're not surprised to see the chief priests and the elders huddling together in secret because we have watched their animosity against Christ grow until it comes to the point of explosion. The dynamite is all packed and wired, but someone has to light the match. So far, that has been the missing piece until Judas Iscariot arranges a meeting with them and volunteers.

We read verse 14 with shock just as Matthew wrote it with grief. "Then one of the twelve..." One of the twelve? One of the twelve who lived together, rode in the boats together, went fishing together, ate together, walked the roads together, preached together, listened to Jesus together, talked together, witnessed the miracles together, sacrificed together and faced both acceptance and rejection together. Matthew does not tell us how Judas made contact with the leaders. I think we can assume that it too was done in secret. All that we know is that they struck a deal and as verse 16 says, "from that moment he sought an opportunity to betray him." Betrayal hangs over this text like a thick fog. The word shows up repeatedly. It is one part of the sorrow that we anticipate.

1. Anticipated Sorrow

A. **Betrayal**

Matthew is very pointed in his language. Back in chapter 10, when the disciples are first listed by name, he puts Judas Iscariot at the end of the list. It is not done subtly for he calls him, Judas Iscariot, “who betrayed him.” By calling him “one of the twelve” in verse 14 and in verse 47 he is helping us feel how deeply this betrayal was. He also points out that the leaders did not come to Judas and bribe him or kidnap someone close to Judas and demand that he provide inside information on Jesus. This is a betrayal that cannot be worse. The betrayal of Christ remains in history as the most famous betrayal that has ever happened.

Benedict Arnold was an excellent general in the Revolutionary Army and fought gallantly in several battles. But Arnold did not get the recognition that he thought he deserved, so he switched sides. Something did not go his way and he sold out his soldiers, his country and himself in the sense that he sold out the oath that he took as a soldier. By linking Judas’ plan to betray Christ to Mary’s washing of Jesus feet, it is obvious that Judas was seething over what had just happened. His betrayal was a calculated plan. This was an extreme reaction because he believed that he had been wronged in an equally extreme manner. So, what was it that drove Judas to do this?

There are two related issues the gospel accounts speak of: The one is plain greed. In John’s gospel we are told that it was Judas who accused Jesus of being wasteful and indulgent by letting Mary pour out this perfume on his feet, when that same perfume could have been sold for 300 denarii and that money could have been given to the poor. John goes on to say (chapter 12) that Judas said this, not because he cared for the poor, but because he was the treasurer of the group and he used to help himself whenever he wanted to the money. Do you see the point? Judas betrayed Jesus here because he had been betraying Jesus and the 12 all along. He didn’t care about the poor. He didn’t care about Jesus. He didn’t care about the other guys. They were a means to an end. He knew how to go along in order to get what he wanted. But then, Jesus exposed him. Jesus exposed him in front of the other guys and Judas was enraged. He did not show it to the point where the rest of the guys could tell, but in that moment he made up his mind. He had ridden this horse as long as he could and now it was time to get off and find something else.

So, here is one of those ironies. Mary’s perfume that she poured out on Jesus was worth 300 denarii. Judas agrees to betray Jesus for 30. Matthew has more to say about this in chapter 27, but for now we, the readers are stunned. One of the twelve has agreed to sell out Jesus, for 30 pieces of silver. But then, in v.17, everything looks like business as usual, right? The disciples come to Jesus and are asking about the details concerning their observing the Passover together. Judas is probably with them. They do not know that anything is up. Judas plays the game well. Judas plays the game well because he has been playing the game well all along. He has been willing to do whatever it takes in order to keep up his reputation. But now, Jesus has started to expose him and Judas is seething

internally. He is so angry about not getting what he thinks he deserves, and is so angry about being corrected that he cannot see straight.

Do you know what I am talking about? Some of you are so angry because you do not get what you think you deserve. You do not get the respect that you think you deserve. You do not get the appreciation that you think you deserve. You do not get the girl or the guy that you think you deserve. Somebody broke up with you and you are livid. Somebody corrected you and you are enraged. Somebody pointed out some things in your life that need correcting and you are seething with hatred at them. When you do that, you are Judas! Do you see that? We are enraged when we do not get the response from life that we think we deserve because we fail to own what we truly deserve. When I truly embrace the gospel, I must first truly embrace the fact that before God I am a rebellious sinner who deserves the wrath of God. God's righteous wrath poured out on me for eternity is justice. Anything, anything short of that is mercy.

How could Judas betray Jesus? How could Judas be so blind? He was blind the same way we are tempted to be blind. He was not poor in spirit. He was not humble. He thought that he deserved his best life now. He thought that he deserved better. So, he stole. He stole from Jesus and he stole from the twelve. He betrayed his position of trust in order to give himself what he thought he should get only to discover that when you live for what you think you deserve, it is never enough. When you believe the lie that you are not getting the life that you think you deserve, you are capable of doing anything and will look for every reason to attempt to justify what you are doing. That is a scary place to be. I will explain more in a minute.

I said that betrayal hangs like a thick fog over the rest of this text. Here is an example of what I mean. V.16 says that Judas was now intent on finding a time and a place where he could pull this off. He needed to find a setting where Jesus was isolated. So, when the disciples come to Jesus in v.17 and ask about the details of when and where they were going to eat the Passover, it is quite possible that it was Judas who started the conversation with a couple of guys by saying, "Hey, any idea where we are going to observe the Passover?" He was looking for an opportune time. Observing the Passover was both a communal and a familial event. In the afternoon, the men would take the lamb for their home to the Temple for it to be sacrificed while the women would prepare the meals at home. Obviously thousands of lambs were sacrificed on this day. In order to offer the blood of the lambs on the altar, the lambs would be sacrificed in the outer courts, and the priests would form two lines from there to the altar. Each priest had a gold or silver bowl. The blood of the lamb would be passed from bowl to bowl down the line until the last priest would pour it out on the altar. The gathered crowds would be singing the Passover Psalms over and over. It was an amazing event. In the evening families would observe the Passover meal together. Judas knows that Jesus can't be arrested in the Temple area in front of the people. That would start a riot. He is very interested to know where they are going to have the Passover meal. Christ answers the question without completely answering the question.

Jesus told them about a “certain man” (v.17) I am guessing that Matthew does not record that man’s name in order to protect that man and his family since he was quite possibly still alive at the time of the writing of the gospel. But Christ’s response reveals that he has everything under control. He has the details for observing the Passover taken care of, and everything that appears to be happening to him is part of the fulfillment of the plan. That is obvious from what the disciples are supposed to tell this certain man. (Mark tells us that it is 2 disciples who are sent on this mission. This is probably to avoid detection.) Jesus told them that they were supposed to find this man then tell him that ‘*The Teacher says, “My time is at hand. I will keep the Passover at your house with my disciples.”*’ Was this pre-arranged by Jesus or was this another of his supernaturally arranged providences that sort of looks like a 1st century use of the force? The two disciples almost look like Jedi, right? You expect them to use a little wave of the hand as they say, “The Teacher says I will keep the Passover at your house, with my disciples” And it works! But, the point is clear. Jesus has the entire situation under control. He knows what is going on. He talks about it in v.20. In fact this is one of the most amazing scenes in the entire story.

Jesus and the disciples are reclining at the meal, which was customary. Leonardo Da Vinci painted the most famous rendition of this scene on the wall of a convent. Unless you go to the convent in Milan, you will never see the original. That famous painting is 15 by 29 feet. Someone thought that the wall needed a door, so they added a door that took out a portion of the painting, including the feet of Jesus. Anyway, in the painting, everyone is seated on one side of a table. Not so! Da Vinci should have read the Bible. The disciples and Jesus were reclining on three couches around a table. Twelve people could be rather close in this manner. Matthew records their observing of the Passover meal as being the occasion for Jesus to reveal the fact that one of them would betray him.

Watch this now. They are all close. They are eating together. They are eating a significant meal together at a very intense time. This is highly personal. Then Jesus says, “Truly I say to you (the formula for, this is really, really important), one of you will betray me.” They heard him. They were stunned. Matthew was there. “They were very sorrowful” and began to question themselves and ask Jesus, is it me? But as they do it, they each ask, “Is it I, Lord?” Jesus responds by saying that it was someone who dipped his bread in the cup along with him. Now, if you happened to be paying attention to who did that, you would probably have seen that every one of the disciples did that at some point during the meal. The point that Jesus was making was that it was someone who was very close to him. This betrayal was deep. Then in another prediction of his death, Jesus says that the Son of Man goes. When someone dies, it is common for us to say that he or she has passed. Passing is an euphemism for death. Jesus is saying the same thing. The Son of Man goes. The Son of Man is going to die as the Scriptures said, “BUT, WOE to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed. It would have been better for that man if he had not been born.” The seriousness of this offense is now matched with the seriousness of this man’s fate. But, even that warning does not change the heart of Judas. In fact, it appears that Judas has given himself so completely over to sin that he has gone past the point of where his heart can be changed. While the others asked, “Is it I, Lord?” Matthew records that in contrast, Judas asks, “Is it I, Rabbi?” Jesus was not his Lord, but just a

Rabbi whom Judas could take, leave, or betray. And yet, Jesus does not blow Judas' cover. Christ treats Judas with the same love, respect and compassion that he does all of the other disciples. The other disciples never have a clue that it is Judas. Matthew writes his gospel with that sense of shock as fresh as it was that night when Judas showed up with the soldiers in the garden. But, there would be more sorrow that night.

B. Desertion

The sorrow of this night is compounded by the fact that Jesus tells them that they are all going to fall away and desert him, this night. He quotes Zechariah the prophet as evidence of this. Christ is not going to find comfort from the eleven when he is betrayed by the one. They are all going to run.

C. Denial

Peter does not believe it and unwisely challenges Christ and tells him that he is wrong. And in that moment, Peter really believes it, but Peter's confidence is in himself and not in Christ. Now Christ is even more direct to Peter and says while the others are going to desert him, Peter is actually going to deny Christ and he is going to do it three times before the rooster crows indicating that it is morning. Peter won't let it go and says that "Even if he dies with Christ, he will not deny him." The rest say the same thing.

There is a difference between Peter and Judas. Peter is not planning to sin. Peter has not made up his mind to pursue a course of rebellion, no matter what. Peter loves Jesus and simply cannot imagine ever being in a situation when he would deny Christ. Peter is willing to die for Christ. But Peter does not know his own heart. His own lack of humility finds him making promises that he cannot keep. He makes promises that he wants to keep. But he makes promises that he will not keep because Peter is not humble enough to believe what Jesus says about him.

Betrayal, Desertion and Denial hang like a fog over this text. But even in this darkness there is light. It is easy to miss the light, but it is there and it is amazing. Jesus helps his disciples anticipate the sorrow, but sorrow will not have the final word. Even as they are anticipating the sorrow, Jesus anticipates restoration.

2. Anticipated Restoration (26-29, 32)

The Passover meal followed a specific order. The head of the home opened the meal with a blessing for the event and for the wine, followed by the first cup of wine. Then food was brought in that consisted of unleavened bread, bitter herbs, greens, stewed fruit and roast lamb. At this point the son would ask his father why this night was different than all other nights and the father would then tell the Exodus story. Psalms 113, 114 and 115 would be read. Then the second cup of wine would be drunk. Then the unleavened bread would be blessed, broken and handed out to the others. It was to be eaten with the herbs, the fruit and the father would explain the meaning of the bread. The rest of the meal would be eaten and had to be completed before midnight. The third cup of wine would be

blessed and drunk followed by singing Psalms 115-116 and 118). A fourth cup of wine would conclude the evening. The Passover meal would take the entire evening. So, when Matthew says (v.26) “Now as they were eating... he is probably referring to the 5th stage in the Passover meal where the head of the event is distributing the unleavened bread. At this point, Jesus reveals that this Passover meal that has been observed for over 1,500 years is actually all about Him! Jesus now gives the ultimate meaning to this event. He says that the bread is a picture of, a symbol of his body and the wine is a symbol of his blood. It is obvious that the bread is not actually his body because he is holding the bread and the wine is not his blood. They all clearly understood this as being symbolic. But, it was a powerful symbol because it represented something that was absolutely amazing. His body and his blood, meaning the offering up of his life as a sacrifice that would be violently killed was the basis of the covenant that he was establishing with many (not all), but many, for the forgiveness of sins. It was with many and not all, because not all would believe him. But for those who would believe him, he provides sacrifice. His blood is the blood of the covenant. This is the promise of the New Covenant.

A. The cross and forgiveness and eternal life.

I am going to die by offering up in your place my body because my body represents my perfect life which I have lived for you. And I am going to die a violent death. I am going to have my life drained from me. My blood is going to be shed. My violent death is necessary because your sin is so serious that it demands a serious sacrifice. But I will do that. I am doing this for you. I am offering to you my body and my blood. I am offering myself to you. Take it and eat. Take it and eat. Join yourself to me. Enter into this covenant by believing what I have done, accepting it for yourself and joining together with me. And in that moment, Christ hijacked the Passover and rendered it obsolete and gave to his followers a new symbol, a new ordinance that we call the Lord’s Supper, or the Lord’s Table. But here it is. Jesus knows the seriousness of the sins that are about to be committed and he knows the power and effectiveness of the forgiveness that he is about to purchase. The point is clear: Your hope is not in the promises that you make, but in the promises that I have kept.

B. The resurrection and restoration

Then Jesus says, “I tell you I will not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father’s kingdom.” What is he saying? He is saying that his death and their failure is not final. He is going to drink wine again, but not until they are with him in the Kingdom. Then on the way to the Mount of Olives when he tells them that they are all going to desert him in a short while, he reassures them that he is going to be raised up and will go before them to Galilee. Once again, the point is clear. Jesus is saying, I am not going to stay dead. I am going to rise again and you will be with me.

I wish that I could believe this for you, but I cannot. The grace of God is so amazing that it is tempting to think that it is too good to be true. It is tempting to think that my sin is

too bad to be forgiven. The issue is not can your sin be forgiven. The issue is, will you believe Jesus?

Judas reveals the eternity-sized distance between embarrassment and humility. There is an eternity-sized distance between shame and confession. There is an eternity-sized distance between humiliation and repentance. Embarrassment says, "I can't believe I did that! I am way better than that. Humility says, "I can believe that I did that and am capable of even worse. I have no reputation to hide behind before God. I am in full need of the righteousness of Christ. Shame says, "I cannot ask God to forgive me because I am too bad. I cannot ask God to forgive me because I already asked for forgiveness for the same thing." Confession says, "Here is my unbelief. Here is my unfaithfulness. Here is my rebellion. Here is my life. Here is my self-righteousness. Here is what I have been hiding behind all these years. I own it and all of its ugliness, I own it and I lay it all out before you God. Humiliation says, "I want to run away. I want to change my name. I want to take my own life. I want to hurt myself." Repentance says, "I want to turn around. I want to take his name. I want Christ to change my life. I accept that Christ was hurt for me."

Embarrassment, shame and humiliation are self-centered. A self-centered life is like dark moist dirt for seeds of bitterness to take root and grow into a dark, life-dominating forest. This was Judas. Judas loved himself and when he saw Mary's love for Christ, he was exposed and he was disgusted. He pretended to be concerned for the poor, but his self-righteousness betrayed the evil in his heart. Beloved, unaddressed bitterness cannot remain in the life of a true believer. If you are embarrassed by people's public confession of love for Christ ask yourself why? Is it possible that their love of Christ exposes your love for self? Be warned, making plans to sin is usually the fruit of thinking that you do not have the life you think you deserve.

Peter reveals the dangers of self-reliance. The truth is, we do not know our own hearts. Any commitment or resolution we make should always be done thinking, "by God's grace." When I hear of the sins of others and am tempted to think that I would never do something like that, I am already on my way."

Jesus reveals the cost of our forgiveness, and he paid it. The ocean of grace is deep and the water is warm. Jump in. Failure does not have to be final. Just ask Peter.