

Pilate and Judas: Profiles in the Murder of Jesus

Matthew 27:1-14

Mark Vroegop

When morning came, all the chief priests and the elders of the people took counsel against Jesus to put him to death. 2 And they bound him and led him away and delivered him over to Pilate the governor.

3 Then when Judas, his betrayer, saw that Jesus was condemned, he changed his mind and brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and the elders, 4 saying, "I have sinned by betraying innocent blood." They said, "What is that to us? See to it yourself." 5 And throwing down the pieces of silver into the temple, he departed, and he went and hanged himself. 6 But the chief priests, taking the pieces of silver, said, "It is not lawful to put them into the treasury, since it is blood money." 7 So they took counsel and bought with them the potter's field as a burial place for strangers. 8 Therefore that field has been called the Field of Blood to this day. 9 Then was fulfilled what had been spoken by the prophet Jeremiah, saying, "And they took the thirty pieces of silver, the price of him on whom a price had been set by some of the sons of Israel, 10 and they gave them for the potter's field, as the Lord directed me."

11 Now Jesus stood before the governor, and the governor asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" Jesus said, "You have said so." 12 But when he was accused by the chief priests and elders, he gave no answer. 13 Then Pilate said to him, "Do you not hear how many things they testify against you?" 14 But he gave him no answer, not even to a single charge, so that the governor was greatly amazed (Matt 27:1-14).

There are certain people whose lives should really be a warning to us. You could think of them like a caution sign around a tight curve – push it too hard and you could go right off a moral cliff. The Old Testament gives us many examples of the kind of path that is foolish, rebellious, and dangerous, and the New Testament often uses their examples as a motivation to be cautious: "These things took place as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did...Therefore, let anyone who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall" (1 Cor 10:6 & 12). Cain murdered his brother. Esau sold his birthright. Lot's wife looked back. Balaam was greedy. And Korah led an infamous rebellion leading to the earth swallowing up his entire family.

Often an example in the past becomes a warning metaphor that is meant to make us shutter. In recent days you've heard this all over the news with a statement like "I really hope that the Fukushima nuclear crisis doesn't become another Chernobyl." Jude 11 uses this kind of metaphor from a spiritual standpoint:

11 Woe to them! For they walked in the way of Cain and abandoned themselves for the sake of gain to Balaam's error and perished in Korah's rebellion. 12 These are blemishes on your love

feasts, as they feast with you without fear, looking after themselves; waterless clouds, swept along by winds; fruitless trees in late autumn, twice dead, uprooted; 13 wild waves of the sea, casting up the foam of their own shame; wandering stars, for whom the gloom of utter darkness has been reserved forever (Jude 11-13).

Judas Iscariot and Pontius Pilate are both prime examples of warning signs. They both have infamous actions attached to each of them: a betrayal by a kiss and washing one's hands of guilt.

Last week (Matthew 26:47-68) we watched as Jesus was unfairly treated by a friend and by justice system. Judas identified him by a kiss, and the Jewish Sanhedrin (the highest governing body) became a lynch mob. In terms of a timeline, it is very early Friday morning, the day that Jesus will be crucified.

When morning came, all the chief priests and the elders of the people took counsel against Jesus to put him to death. 2 And they bound him and led him away and delivered him over to Pilate the governor (Matt 27:1-2)

Central in this plot of Jesus's crucifixion are Pilate and Judas, and that is where Matthew turns next. Therefore, we are going to explore their lives in order to see two paths that should serve as a warning. We are going to look at how two different men responded to Jesus so that we can ask ourselves how we respond to Jesus.

Judas – When Greed Leads to Regret and Ruin

We have seen Judas long before this text, but so far in our series we've not examined the specific details of his background and motivation. I'd like to try to do that now because it helps us to understand the tragic end of his life.

Matthew first introduces Judas to us in Matthew 10:4 when he is simply listing the twelve disciples. Matthew identifies him not only as one of the twelve but also as "Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him {Jesus}." The name Iscariot is a bit of a mystery. It could refer to his hometown or it could be an indirect reference to an association of Judas's family with extreme Jewish nationalists. Iscariot may be a Semitic form of a word that means "dagger bearer" or "assassin."¹ Therefore, it could be that Judas joined the disciples because he saw opportunity to advance his personal agenda.

Influenced by Satan

We also know that Judas was associated with the Devil. Jesus said as much in John 6:70-71 –

¹ G.W. Buchanan, "Judas Iscariot" - [The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia](#) (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing, 1979)

“Did I now choose you, the Twelve? And yet one of you is a devil. He spoke of Judas the son of Simon Iscariot, one of the twelve, was going to betray him.”

Further, Judas was empowered by the Devil. Luke 22:3 tells us that “Satan entered into Judas” before he conferred with the chief priests about delivering Jesus to them. So there was clearly an evil and satanic influence upon him that Judas somehow willingly embraced.

Motivated by Greed

So why did Judas betray Jesus? What was his motivation? I think that we get a clue from an incident that we’ve looked at before. Matthew 26 records an event where Mary pours extravagantly expensive ointment on Jesus’s head and feet. If you go back and look at this story (Matthew 26:6-13) you’ll see that immediately after it, Matthew records the following:

14 Then one of the twelve, whose name was Judas Iscariot, went to the chief priests 15 and said, “What will you give me if I deliver him over to you?” And they paid him thirty pieces of silver. 16 And from that moment he sought an opportunity to betray him (Matt 26:14-16).

John’s account (John 12:4) of the same story tells us that it was Judas who raised the issue about the waste of money, but it was “not because he cared for the poor, but because he was a thief.”

If we put all of this together, we get a picture of a man who is motivated by self-centered greed. Listen again to his words to the priests: “What will you give me...” It seems that Judas wanted something more from Jesus than what he was seeing, and it had to be more than just money because 30 pieces of silver was not that much money.

Judas was likely looking for a military-political Messiah and became disillusioned when Jesus’s ministry no longer served his desired ends. He saw the path that Jesus was identifying to his disciples, and something about the waste of the money on perfume pushed him over the edge. He may have even been looking to force Jesus into a confrontation. We’ll never know the details in full, but one thing is clear: Jesus was expendable to Judas. He wanted something else, and that is what led him to betray the Son of God.

Filled with Regret

However, Matthew 27:3 tells that once Judas saw that Jesus was condemned, he “changed his mind.” The word that Matthew uses here means great regret. The NIV renders it “he was seized with remorse.” In other words, he felt bad – even terrible – about what he did. He could now see the consequences of his actions. However, this is not the word that the Bible

normally uses for repentance. And by his actions we know that Judas was filled with regret but not repentance. There's a difference; look where it led:

- He attempts to bring back the thirty pieces of silver to the priests because he knows that he has betrayed innocent blood (27:3-4).
- The priests are unsympathetic and not receptive. "What is that to us? See to it yourself" (27:4). In other words, they don't care because their dealings with Jesus weren't about justice anyway. The religious leaders will not absolve him of his guilt by making things right. It is too late.
- Judas throws the money into the temple (27:5).

He knows that what he has done is wrong; he feels guilty; he wants the guilt to stop. But when regret is the primary motivation for actions, it leads the wrong direction.

Death from Despair

Judas cannot find absolution for his regret, and so he chooses to follow his self-centered greed to the ultimate end: suicide. He wants the pain to stop, but he will not repent. There is no attempt to head back to where Jesus is. There is no attempted confession to Christ. The despair that comes from a disappointing idol pushes him to take his own life. Verse five tells us very bluntly that he "hanged himself." Acts 1:19 puts even more grotesque color on it indicating that at some point Judas's body fell into a ravine and "his bowels gushed out." This kind of gruesome death is meant to indicate the curse of God (Deut. 21:23).

The text ends with an ironic twist. The religious rulers won't receive the money so they buy a field for the burial of pilgrims who die in the city. And in doing so, they fulfill a biblical prophecy:

But the chief priests, taking the pieces of silver, said, "It is not lawful to put them into the treasury, since it is blood money." 7 So they took counsel and bought with them the potter's field as a burial place for strangers. 8 Therefore that field has been called the Field of Blood to this day. 9 Then was fulfilled what had been spoken by the prophet Jeremiah, saying, "And they took the thirty pieces of silver, the price of him on whom a price had been set by some of the sons of Israel, 10 and they gave them for the potter's field, as the Lord directed me" (Matt 27:6-10).

Judas is ruined. Greed led to regret without repentance and then to his ruin. Unfortunately, this is a familiar path in how some people respond to Jesus. Greedy, self-centered people follow a god of their own making, but it is a shallow pursuit that leads to destruction.

Even in his regret Judas was self-centered. He is a warning about the disaster that comes from unbridled greed and self-centered regret.

Pilate – When Indifference Rises from Curiosity and Fear

The tragic image of Pontius Pilate's life is not a noose; it is a basin of water. The warning sign from him is a scene in which he washes his hands. And if there is one word that captures Pilate's role in Jesus's life it would be the word "indifferent." He famously said, "I am innocent of this man's blood; see to it yourselves" (27:24). In other words: "Whatever! Do what you want." Pilate's curiosity with Jesus and his fear of the crowds led him to be indifferent.

Curious

Matthew records the following encounter with Pilate:

11 Now Jesus stood before the governor, and the governor asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" Jesus said, "You have said so." 12 But when he was accused by the chief priests and elders, he gave no answer. 13 Then Pilate said to him, "Do you not hear how many things they testify against you?" 14 But he gave him no answer, not even to a single charge, so that the governor was greatly amazed (Matt 27:11-14).

Pilate begins the court proceeding and asks Jesus an important question: "Are you the King of the Jews?" We'll see this again when it is posted above the head of Jesus at his crucifixion as an indictment of Jesus and a slam against the entire Jewish nation. But in this context it is the essence of the charge against him. He is being accused of blasphemy by the Jewish law and sedition by Roman law. The connection of the two law systems is the claim of being the King. Once again, Jesus responds with "You have said so."

The religious leaders (v 12) began accusing him again. Apparently they were trying to make their case to Pilate about the serious nature of what Jesus had done. Pilate, who is used to dealing with defendants, is amazed at Jesus's refusal to defend himself. Obviously, he is not familiar with the prophecy that was written about the Messiah in Isaiah 53:7 –

7 He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth.

Pilate doesn't know what to do with Jesus. It could be that he's never seen anything like him. It could be that he found the charges to be bogus. It could be that he has heard things about him (we know this to be the case with Herod – see Luke 23:8). Regardless, Pilate was amazed at Jesus and his actions.

Fear

Pilate's curiosity is short-lived because it isn't long until another emotion takes over: fear. If we skip ahead to Matthew 26:24, we read these words: "So when Pilate saw that he was

gaining nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning...” Now to understand what Pilate does next, you have to know something about his background and history.

Pilate was appointed as a Roman governor or procurator over Judea by the Emperor Tiberius, and he served in that role from 26 AD – 36 AD.² Judea was an occupied land that had traded hands between major superpowers numerous times, and it was a hotbed for religious and political upheaval. It was not a post for a slacker or a weak leader. Pilate was neither. Historical sources tell us that Pilate was a cruel, imperious, and insensitive ruler who was likely anti-Semitic.³ It is alleged that he stole money from the temple treasury to build various public work projects, and that he killed many protestors when the people reacted negatively. On multiple occasions other occasions he angered the Jewish people by doing things that they felt were religiously insensitive (see Luke 13:1), including setting up Roman standards throughout the city of Jerusalem (think: the German swastika flying next to the wailing wall). According to Philo, a Jewish philosopher and historian, King Agrippa I described Pilate as “a man of a very inflexible disposition, and very merciless as well as very obstinate.”⁴

However the Pilate that we see in the Bible is quite different. He appears to be weak-kneed, acquiescent, and cowardly. Why? I think there is a good reason. It is likely that the events of Matthew happen during a time when Pilate was skating on thin ice with Rome. The trial of Jesus likely occurred in close proximity to a major flare-up in Jerusalem that Pilate caused and had to be settled by a directive from Caesar himself. Pilate was directly rebuked by Rome, and the Jewish leaders probably knew that Pilate was on the hot seat. In fact approximately three years after Jesus’s death, Pilate was recalled to Rome, removed as Governor of Judea and banished.⁵ Therefore, when Jesus comes to Pilate on the eve of a national holiday with thousands of religiously energized people in the city, he has a lot to think about.

Pilate knows that Jesus is innocent. And when sending him to Herod (Luke 23:6ff) and flogging him doesn’t work to appease the crowd, he is stuck. The fear of the crowds and Rome eclipse a right response to Jesus. Pilate decides that he will not decide.

Indifference

Skip ahead to 27:24 to see what Pilate famously does.

“So when Pilate saw that he was gaining nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning, **he took water and washed his hands before the crowd saying, “I am innocent of this man’s blood; see to it yourselves”** (Matt 27:24).

² John Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP, 1986), 49.

³ D.A. Carson, *Matthew – The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing, 1984), 559.

⁴ Stott, 50.

⁵ Carson, 560.

Once again we see Pilate's disdain for the Jewish people because the washing of one's hands like this was not a Roman custom; it was a Jewish custom. Pilate knows exactly what he is doing. Listen to Deuteronomy 21:6-7, a text that speaks as to what the people were to do with an unsolved murder:

6 And all the elders of that city nearest to the slain man shall wash their hands over the heifer whose neck was broken in the valley, 7 and they shall testify, 'Our hands did not shed this blood, nor did our eyes see it shed (Deut 21:6-8).

This is not by coincidence. Pilate is filled with spite for the Jews and indifference toward Jesus. And here Pilate makes a mistake that he will regret for eternity: he tragically thinks that not making a decision on Jesus absolves him of guilt. Pilate's curiosity is trumped by fear, and he chooses indifference. He is intrigued but unwilling to deal with the consequences of doing what is right. He washed his hands, but he is not clean.

Warnings for Us

Not unlike a sign on the curve, these men serve as warnings for all of us. Let me give you three:

1. Beware of where greed will take you

Judas, Pilate, Adam and Eve all had something in common: greed. They all wanted something, and it took them down a path opposite of God's. Eve wanted to be like God; Adam didn't want to be left behind; Judas wanted power; and Pilate wanted Jesus not to be his problem.

But greed is not just greed. According to Colossians 3:5, greed is actually idolatry – a passion to be your own god, to run your own life, to have life as you want it. And Jesus has come to conquer your greed, to show you that there is nothing more needed in your life than for you to be forgiven of everything you are apart from God and to show you that there is not more valuable than for you to make Jesus your Lord. This is why he died. Jesus came to bring an end to the self-focused greed that is ruining your life and will damn your soul.

2. Beware of confusing regret with repentance

Do you know that there is difference between regret and repentance? The Apostle Paul talks about the difference between regret and repentance in 2 Corinthians 7:10-11.

10 Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death. 11 See what this godly sorrow has produced in you: what earnestness, what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what alarm, what longing, what concern, what readiness to see justice done (2 Cor 7:10-11 – NIV).

Mark it down: feeling bad and doing a few things about it doesn't equal repentance. True repentance is a radical turning from sin to Christ. It is coming to end of your solutions, your ideas, your agenda, your feelings, and your expectations. John Piper helps us understand the difference:

Worldly regret is when you feel sorry for something you did because it starts to backfire on you and leads to humiliation or punishment. It's the reflex of a proud or fearful ego. Pride will always regret making a fool of itself. And fear will always regret acts that jeopardize comfort and safety. So feeling sorry for something we have done is in itself no sign of virtue. But godly regret is the reflex of a conscience that has wounded *God's* ego, not its own. Godly regret grieves that *God's* name has come into disrepute. The focus of godly regret is *God*.⁶

True repentance involves feeling bad; but more importantly it also involves a love for Jesus that conquers your love of self and the guilt that goes with it.

3. Beware of thinking that indifference about Jesus is safe

You can say "whatever" about two choices that have no moral or eternal implications – like whether you'll eat at Wendys or McDonalds. You can say, "You decide" if your wife asks you which blouse you like better. You can be indifferent – not really care – and it is no big deal. But it is a totally different situation with what you do with Jesus. Why?

Because the Bible tells us that our innate sinfulness (see Romans 3:10-18) and Jesus's innate Lordship (see Philippians 2:9-11) demand a response. And a failure to respond **is a response**. Doing nothing is doing something with it comes to Jesus.

We enter this world already part of a rebellious race that has already committed spiritual treason. Therefore, indifference to Jesus is not just indifference; it is insurrection.

Oh, don't be like Judas full of greed, regret and ruin. Be warned about being like Pilate. By deciding to do nothing, you are doing something very dangerous. Heed the warning signs of their lives, and turn in faith to Jesus.

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⁶ <http://www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/sermons/the-good-end-of-godly-regret>