

"Judas, Who Became"

Luke tells us that Jesus chose 12 to be His disciples (Luke 6:12-16). One was "Judas Iscariot, who became a traitor" (Luke 6:16). Judas Iscariot is one of the dark and mysterious figures not only in the Bible, but in all of history. Judas – the traitor! There are so many unanswered questions. What was he really like? Why did Jesus choose him in the first place? What were his real motives for turning against Jesus?

There is a tendency now among Bible students and scholars to paint a brighter picture of Judas, saying he was well intentioned. He believed Jesus was the Messiah, but a military conqueror type. When he saw the authorities turning against Jesus, he wanted to force Jesus' hand so he would fight back and set up His kingdom before it was too late. Well, there might be some truth in this; we can't be sure. But this "softer" view of Judas is not how Biblical writers experienced him. (And they were closer to the events than us).

He's called a *traitor*. "Judas Iscariot, who became a *traitor*" (Luke 6:16). A "traitor" is defined as "one who betrays another's trust or is false to an obligation of duty"; "an act of deliberate disloyalty." There is something ugly about this word and what it represents.

Remember that awful scene in the Garden of Gethsemane? Jesus has been praying there, then this huge crowd of people and soldiers come up to Jesus, with swords and clubs. Judas has tipped off the religious authorities that Jesus will be there. It's dark, they are carrying torches so they can see. Judas comes up to Jesus and says, "Greetings, Rabbi", and kisses him. This was the normal greeting among friends. You're there. You see that. And you're going to say, "Oh, Judas meant well; he was just a bit misguided!" And, of course, afterwards, Judas regretted the whole thing. He tried to give the money back to the religious leaders. Then he went and committed suicide – he hung himself.

The picture of this man wasn't always so ugly! As far as I can tell, we know nothing about Judas' earlier life or childhood. There's no reason to believe he was much different from any other toddler or adolescent growing up. I can imagine his parents were as proud as any parents of a new baby boy. They probably posted his baby pictures on Facebook! His grandparents no doubt had a license plate on their donkey or camel that said, "Happiness is being a grandparent." They had photos of him all over their house!

The word "Iscariot" means "man of Kerioth", a town in Palestine. He was probably just another boy growing up in his hometown of Kerioth. I can imagine his mom and dad had high hopes for him, that he'd make something of his life. He got the chance of a lifetime when Jesus, the Lord of life, personally asked him to be a disciple! What an honor and what an opportunity to be where the action is!

But somewhere along the way something went wrong. And so, Luke, writing some years afterwards, says Jesus chose "Judas Iscariot, who became a traitor" (Luke 6:16).

What are you becoming? Are you satisfied with the direction of your life? Is it really the direction you want to go? In your relationship with God? The way you relate to the people?

The person you are inside, morally and spiritually? What you're doing with your life, what you are accomplishing?

What are you and I becoming? Sometimes we go through significant, life-changing events, something that impacts us so much that it alters the course in life we are taking. It could be a person we meet, or an experience we have, that just sets us on a different compass heading in life. *Sometimes* this happens. But not that often! For the most part, years from now, we will be the culmination of what we are and how we're living *now*.

I preached on this Scripture text and theme about 35 years ago. Once again, about 25 years ago. I was younger then (I bet you couldn't have figured that out). I have to smile as I read what I said back then. Let me share from one of those earlier sermons.

I said, when I was really young, a young Christian, I figured by the time I was in my late 30's or 40's I would have it together! My personality quirks, character flaws, spiritual shortcomings, would all be behind me. I continued by saying hopefully, God has helped me grow and gain some level of maturity. But I'm beyond my 40's (still am!), and there are parts of me I don't like. And then I said in that earlier sermon, one day it dawned on me that if I live to be 60, or 70, or 80, there's no magic charm or wonder working formula that will quickly turn me into a spiritual giant or cream of the crop specimen of humanity! Nothing's going to happen that will make me an instant saint. But at 60, or 75, I'll be what I've been *becoming* over all those previous years.

So here I am, still alive, some years later. And I'm pretty much a product of what I've been becoming day after day, month after month, year after year.

Now probably for most of us, this is a "good news, bad news" kind of deal. Hopefully, if there's anything good about my life, it's a culmination of some positive things, some wise choices, some faithful disciplines I've been doing along the way. That's the good news. The bad news is, if there are weaknesses and flaws and failures and sins, it's not like they just popped up out of nowhere. I've been charting that course all these years.

There's an old saying, "Sow a thought, and you reap an act; sow an act, and you reap a habit; sow a habit, and you reap a character; sow a character, and you reap a destiny." Little things add up to make a lifetime and a life! Little decisions...routine choices...daily habits. All of these are determining what you and I are becoming.

As I said, there can be a negative side to this. Hardly anybody sets out to be the worst person we can be. To really botch up our life in grand fashion! Rather inch by inch, hour by hour, we set our course and destination.

Maybe that was the way it was with Judas. John 12:6 says, "He was a thief, as keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it." Perhaps he rationalized: "I only took a small amount; I'll pay it back soon." Then after a while, "Well, I deserve *something* extra for being the treasurer of this group." Then, "After all, I left my job to follow Jesus. What I take

is small compensation for my major sacrifice." We can cheat a little here, fudge a little there, sidestep this responsibility, neglect this discipline, and one day wake up, look in the mirror and think, "What have I become!"

But there's a positive side to this, isn't there! Moment by moment, bit by bit, in the little things of life, we can build a life worthy of our Lord's calling. In being faithful in the small responsibilities laid on us, in daily devotional habits (even though it all seems "dry" and perfunctory at times), in resisting the little temptations and compromises, in making it a habit to show mercy and compassion towards everyone. At the time, when we're doing all of these things, it may seem like nothing much is happening. But slowly and surely we're carving out a life of integrity and godliness.

Clovis Chappell, a great preacher of a previous generation, once said, "The direction in which we are traveling is the most important fact about any of us. What we *are* is of importance, but what we are *becoming* is of far greater importance. If we are facing in the right direction there is no telling how Christlike we may become, for we have a whole eternity in which to climb. If we are facing in the wrong direction, ever so slightly, there is no telling to what depth we may descend."

I believe that this sermon has a different twist to it, depending on how young, or how old we are.

Some of you are young, and God willing, you have your whole lifetime ahead of you. You have a wonderful opportunity to carve out for yourself a life that matters to God and others. To give yourself to the Lord Jesus and let Him make something of your life! But pay attention to the *direction* of your life, and the little daily things that will determine to a large degree what you'll be like 50, 60 years from now.

Some of you are in your mid-life years. You are to a large extent what you've been becoming ever since your childhood, teen years. But you've got perhaps half of your life yet ahead you. Think about the path you're on. And if you need to correct course, start to make those changes and do the little things that will help you get to where God wants you to be.

And then some of you (some of us!) are in are "senior years". You may have been thinking, "Nice sermon, but not for me. I'm in the last chapter of my life. Nothing's going to change now." Really? Really! You're not dead yet! And while we can't *totally* undo what we've built up in a lifetime, we can still make corrective changes that bring us closer to God and make us a better person. You can still make a difference for good in someone's life in whatever time you have left!

Recently in the local newspaper there was a delightful article about Dolly Parton. She had just celebrated her 75th birthday. She says, "I work 365 (days a year). I'm always working 5 to 9, 9 to 5. I work all hours of the night and day... whatever you need to do, you gotta get it done, however many hours it takes." She was asked: "How does it feel to be 75?" Her answer: "Well I plan to be around a lot longer. I don't have no plans of slowing down because the number says I should. I don't pay attention to that. I wake up with new dreams every day. I try to make the

most of every year that I've lived. I've been doing that since I was little. I'll be doing it until I keel over. Hopefully, that won't be anytime soon". She's donating \$1 million to coronavirus research, working with the people at Vanderbilt University. She was asked what compelled her to do that. She replied, "Well, I follow my heart. I'm a person of faith, and I pray all the time that God will lead me into the right direction and let me know what to do."

Today is the first Sunday of Lent. I think what I'm trying to say today is appropriate for the first Sunday of Lent. Why is that? Lent is that period before Easter when Christians focus on Jesus' last days, and the meaning of His suffering and death. But traditionally it's also a time for self-examination and self-denial, and committing to spiritual disciplines so we can be more effective followers of Jesus.

Lent is a wonderful time to assess our lives and make course corrections! We humans seem to be the only creatures with this capacity. Our dogs, our cats can't do it. Lions and tigers in the zoo can't do it. Only humans have the capacity to step back, evaluate our lives and the direction we're heading, and make the changes needed to achieve different goals in life.

Lent is a wonderful time to ask God to help us become a better person, the person God wants each of us to be, a more faithful follower of Jesus.

The good news is we are still writing the story of what we're becoming! We still have some time. We still have a chance to get it right!

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