



When Serving Mammon Backfires

Sunday, April 6, 2025

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Gospel Lesson, John 12:1-11

¹ Six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, where Lazarus lived, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. ² Here a dinner was given in Jesus' honor. Martha served, while Lazarus was among those reclining at the table with him. ³ Then Mary took about a pint of pure nard, an expensive perfume; she poured it on Jesus' feet and wiped his feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.

⁴ But one of his disciples, Judas Iscariot, who was later to betray him, objected, ⁵ "Why wasn't this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year's wages. ⁶ He did not say this because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief; as keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it.

⁷ "Leave her alone," Jesus replied. "It was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial. ⁸ You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me."

⁹ Meanwhile a large crowd of Jews found out that Jesus was there and came, not only because of him but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. ¹⁰ So the chief priests made plans to kill Lazarus as well, ¹¹ for on account of him many of the Jews were going over to Jesus and believing in him.

Sermon, “When Serving Mammon Backfires”

Imagine it's Easter Sunday, and the entire family has gathered at your home for an Easter feast of spiral-cut ham, mashed potatoes, corn, asparagus, deviled eggs, and dinner rolls. It's the kind of feast you'd serve when there's something to celebrate—and what an occasion this is: Someone has defeated death and walked out of the grave! Someone says grace, and then everybody digs in.

The mood is upbeat; everybody's smiling and laughing. Everybody's enjoying the excellent food, and there's just a good vibe in the room.

And then, out of nowhere, Uncle Walter blurts out his political assessment of the president, and the good vibes immediately go up in smoke. Tension fills the air and everyone looks awkwardly at the food on their plate. Who's going to say what to add to the tension?

We've all been in those kinds of uncomfortable situations. We all have our Uncle Walter who knows how to spoil the moment by saying something inappropriate, leaving everyone else feeling embarrassed to even be in the room. A shared meal ought to be a time of support and friendship, not of tension or anger.

But that's exactly what happens in today's Gospel lesson. Jesus has just called Lazarus forth from the grave, so to celebrate, Martha prepares a celebratory meal. Lazarus, of course, is at the table, when Mary comes and anoints the feet of Jesus with fine perfume and then wipes his feet with her hair.

And then Uncle Walter—in this case, Judas Iscariot—blurts out, “Why wasn't this ointment sold? It would have fetched a year's wages! You could have given the proceeds to the poor!”

And the good vibes immediately go up in smoke. Tension fills the air, and everyone looks awkwardly at the food on their plate. Who's going to say what to add to the tension?

Part of the tragedy of this little scene is that Jesus badly needs and wants his followers to be united at this moment. The rest of the world is plotting against him; his friends might at least have had the decency to stick together and back him. But no. Tension, rather than support, crackles in the air.¹

What could possibly have motivated Judas to become so disruptive at such a tender moment?

It is not John's purpose to tell Judas' side of the story; John's purpose is to tell the story of Jesus. But John does tell us something that none of the other gospel writers reveal: Judas wasn't concerned about giving the money to the poor; John tells us that Judas was “the keeper of the money bag (and that) he used to help himself to what was put into it” (vs. 6)

¹ NT Wright, *John for Everyone*, Vol. 2, pg. 21.

We don't know how Judas' embezzlement came to light; none of the other gospel writers mention it and none of the other disciples seemed to be aware of it, but John was. However, all four of the gospels agree that Judas was the one who conspired with the chief priests and Pharisees in order to betray Jesus. Matthew alone tells us the price for betrayal was thirty pieces of silver; today, that would be worth less than \$300—not much for a life, especially a life so precious as Christ's.

But I have a sneaking suspicion about Judas: I don't think Judas was trying to get what we would call a fair market price for betraying Jesus. I think Judas had followed Jesus long enough to know that in Luke 4:29, the people of Nazareth tried to throw Jesus off a cliff to kill him, but Jesus simply slipped through their hands and went on his way, unharmed.

Likewise, in John 10:31, the Jews picked up stones to stone Jesus, but in verse 39, he simply “escaped their grasp.”

I remember coming across a story several years ago about a woman who embezzled some money from her employer. Actually, she says that she “borrowed” the money and planned to repay the till. However, she did not ask for permission to borrow the money, nor did she fill out anything resembling an IOU. Payday after payday passed without her being able to repay her secret debt. And the prospects for doing so were growing dim. So, she got the bright idea of borrowing even more money from her employer and taking it down to the casino where she would “invest” it in some slot machines until she would win big and repay her employer.

You can guess what happened. She won a little here and there, but never enough to climb out of the hole she'd dug for herself. Then she'd take more and more from her employer so she could keep feeding the one-armed bandits down on the boats until finally her secret debt had climbed well into six figures. She never did win big and when the authorities caught up with her, she lost her job and became a felon.

I think that's a little closer to what Judas Iscariot had in mind when he went to the chief priests and asked, “What are you willing to give me if I deliver Jesus over to you?” The chief priests pooled their pocket money together and came up with thirty pieces of silver. It wasn't much, Judas knew, but it would be enough to repay the money he'd stolen from the disciples' money bag. Then all Jesus would have to do is just slip away from the soldiers like he'd done every other time when someone tried to arrest him. Then Jesus would be free and safe, the disciples' money bag would be properly balanced, and no one would ever have to know that Judas had taken money from it.

Judas knew it was a gamble, but it was a safe bet. Or at least he assumed so. After all, Jesus had just raised Lazarus from the dead! Nothing could possibly go wrong, could it?

I think that's why Judas was so filled with remorse that he took his own life in Matthew 27; his plan had not worked out as expected. Consequently, he chose to die for his own sin not realizing that at that very moment Jesus was dying for his sins, and doing a much better job of it.

When Jesus said from the cross, “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do,” I can't help but think that Jesus included Judas Iscariot in that short prayer. Clearly, Judas had no idea what he was getting himself into when he agreed to betray Jesus for a measly thirty pieces of silver. We do know, however, that up to the very last moment, Jesus sought to honor

Judas and to restore him to a right relationship with the One he had betrayed because when we compare the accounts of the Last Supper, we see Jesus trying to restore Judas into fellowship with him.

What might we learn from this sad story? A couple of weeks ago we looked at Isaiah 55:

⁸“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the Lord.

⁹“As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.

Lesson Number One: Never assume you know what God’s plans might be. Judas’ plot likely would’ve succeeded were it not for the fact that the time had finally come for Jesus to be lifted up on the cross of Calvary that he might make atonement for the sins of humanity.

Lesson number two: Little sins if left unconfessed can snowball into huge sins and crimes. For Judas, the little sin of pocketing a few pesos from the company purse eventually snowballed into a kiss in the Garden of Gethsemane. And for Judas, that soon led to his own untimely death.

Lesson number three: No one ever needs to die for his or her own sins. And no one ever has to pay the price for his or her own sins. There’s an old gospel song that rightly declares, “Jesus paid it all; all to him I owe. Sin had left a crimson stain, but he washed it bright as snow.” Jesus has already paid the price for our sin far more effectively than we ever could do.

Lesson number four: Sadly, Judas illustrates the words of Jesus in Matthew 6:24, “No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Mammon.” Mammon, of course, represents all forms of worldly wealth.

For three years, Judas followed Jesus. I like to think that he never intended to be anything but a follower of Jesus. That’s certainly evident from his remorseful words just before he took his own life. But somewhere along the line, money captured first his imagination. Then it captured his full devotion. He thought he could have them both, money and Jesus. So he plotted for ways to get the money and in the process, he did something he never ever intended to do: he betrayed Jesus. Serving mammon backfired for Judas.

We are here today because we want to follow Jesus. But if we’re not careful, we may allow the quest for mammon to capture our imagination and our thoughts and our devotion until finally we reach the point that, though we never meant for it to happen, we’ve become more devoted to mammon than we are to Jesus.

It can happen to the best of us; I pray it doesn’t happen to you. Mammon is a hard taskmaster: it will sink its claw deep into your soul.

First Timothy 6:10 states that “the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil.” Not money itself, but our love for and devotion to money is the root of all evil. Our devotion to money can lead to broken relationships; just consider Judas whose love for money shattered his relationship with Jesus. Yes, forgiveness was there for him, had he sought it out. But Judas did not. Moreover, Judas’ love for money shattered his relationship with the other disciples. And it didn’t have to turn out that way.