

“A Different Treason”

John 13:31-38

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Text Comment

With v. 31 we begin what has long been known as the “Upper Room Discourse.” It begins upon the departure of Judas from the room where the Last Supper was held – leaving the Lord alone with his true disciples – and continues through the Lord’s great prayer in chapter 17.

- v.31 It appears that the departure of Judas was the last event needing to take place before the onset of the Lord’s passion. Judas is now to set in motion the machinery of arrest, trial, and execution. But, of course, here again we find the terrible and wonderful irony: in this darkness and betrayal and in the suffering to come, the glory of God will shine in the most brilliant display imaginable of his love and his justice.
- v.33 Now the Lord begins with what is to be a major focus of the discourse (and was, of course, already in the foot-washing), viz. preparing his disciples for his departure and the life they must live after he is gone. He, of course, will come back to them for a short time after his resurrection, but here and throughout their discourse the Lord’s departure at his death and at his ascension forty days later are a theological unity. He is talking about the life they will live as his servants when he is no longer with them in the world. The forty days between Easter and Ascension Day are not in view. Twice he had told the unbelieving Jews that he was leaving and that they would not be able to find him (7:24; 8:21). But he told *them* that they would die in their sins, he is about to tell *his disciples* that he is going to prepare a place for them so that where he is they may eventually be also!
- v.35 As with other themes in the Upper Room Discourse, this one will be taken up again in 15:9-16. It was characteristic of the Lord’s pedagogy to repeat, to return to a subject over and over again, so as to drive home his most important teaching. All good teachers do this. The idea of Christians’ love for one another being a witness to the world is, as you remember, also taken up again in the great prayer in chapter 17.

The commandment to love one another is, of course, not “new” in any absolute sense. The Mosaic law demanded both the love of God and of one’s neighbor. But it is a commandment given with a new impetus and example by the Lord Jesus. There is a deeper understanding of it because of what we have learned of the love that exists between the persons of the Triune God, which was not revealed in the ancient epoch. In John 17 that point is made powerfully: by their love for one another, Christians will demonstrate to the world that the Father sent the Son for the world’s salvation. It is an ancient commandment, as it were, dusted off, polished, and presented with new power and beauty.

- v.36 The point of the previous two verses is not developed in detail because Peter interrupts to pick up the thread of the Lord's statement about his imminent departure. The disciples are less interested in the new commandment than the threatened departure of their Master, just as in our day many Christians are interested more in scenarios of the Lord's second coming than loving one another!

Now, as you can see by the sermon title in the bulletin, I had thought to treat this text as a statement of the theme of brotherly love as fundamental to Christian life and witness. There is much to say on that theme, of course. Indeed, there are scholars who have charged the Gospel of John with a lower view of love than we find in the Synoptic Gospels and the Sermon on the Mount, because John concentrates so single-mindedly on *brotherly* love, the love of Christians for one another, and not on the love of enemies. We will return to those themes in due time, for they are taken up in detail later in this same discourse.

But, as I studied the paragraph it became clear to me that its central interest is the prediction of Peter's betrayal, and, in the context, its predication of that betrayal as coming so hard after the prediction of the betrayal of Judas. We have two traitors here, two betrayals. And, to many observers there would not be a great deal to distinguish the one treason from the other. Both men stabbed the Lord in the back. Both men had no excuse whatsoever. Both men were overcome by remorse after doing what they had done. Both betrayals were predicted by the Lord beforehand in the Upper Room.

But one man went to hell and the other man went to heaven! One man never saw the Lord Jesus again and the other man was honored with a private conference with Jesus on the day of his resurrection. One man died by his own hand soon after his crime, the other man lived a long and extraordinarily fruitful life and died violently at the hands of others, a Christian martyr, finally fulfilling the proud boast he had so foolishly made that night in the Upper Room. One traitor's name has lived forever in the annals of infamy, the other became one of the most celebrated and sacred names of human history. We use one name as a slur and brand our enemies with it; we give the other to our sons.

If there is anything that is perfectly obvious in the comparison of these two men, Judas and Peter, a comparison forced upon us by the juxtaposition of these two predictions of betrayal, one following the other in chapter 13, it is that there can be a universe of distance between two men who behave in very similar ways! Indeed, at the moment of their betrayal of the Lord, these two men, for different reasons to be sure, would have appeared to observers as far more alike than different. In fact, we might have thought better of Judas than of Peter, for Peter's betrayal was pure cowardice on his part. Judas, apparently, had some reason or another to justify what he did. People might have spoken of Judas the way many foolish people in the West so commonly spoke of communist leaders in the 20th century. They would disagree with their political program but give them credit for trying to build a more just world. Well, many would say today, Judas shouldn't have done what he did, but he felt strongly that...or, he was compelled to bring an end to Jesus' program because... Whereas Peter was just yellow.

Now there is a powerful irony here in this paragraph. Perhaps you felt the wrench as we read it. The Lord began to speak of the love of his followers for one another as the true manifestation of

faith in him and as the means of persuading the world of the truth about him and his salvation. In other words, we are prepared to hear that Christians will be very different from the world, so different, in fact, that the world will sit up and take notice and be forced to ask where this wonderful difference comes from.

But, the words about brotherly love are scarcely out of the Lord's mouth when he must bring proud Peter down to earth by predicting that before the night is out Peter would disown him three times. There isn't anything too other-worldly about cowardice and betrayal. The world isn't going to wonder by what power and what divine gift men tell lies to save their own skin. They are familiar enough with that. That is the stuff of ordinary life in this world. It needs no special explanation. No one is going to fall at his feet and worship Christ because he surrounded by a bunch of cowards!

And ever since, this has been the way of it. Ever since the church has been summoned to live this special life, this life of supernatural love, and then has had to be rebuked for failing to do so. *And, to be sure, ever since, the church **has lived** this wonderful life of love in Christ's name and ever since she **has failed** to love one another as Christ loved her.*

You have heard the famous comment of the church father Tertullian, writing in the 3rd century, in his great work, *The Apology* (xxxix). *The Apology* is a defense of Christianity, addressed to the Roman emperor, and was intended to dispel the false accusations so widely circulated about Christians. Justin, himself, before he became a Christian, had a typically jaundiced view of Christianity. He had heard all the terrible things that were circulating about Christians, about their evils, their superstitions, their lack of patriotism. But then he had come to know them, observe them, their heroism in the face of death, their charity and goodness. In this particular passage Justin is describing the way Christians care for one another.

“There is no buying or selling of any sort in the things of God. Though we have our treasure-chest, it is not made up of purchase-money, as of a religion that has its price. On the ... day, if he likes, each puts in a ... donation; but only if it be his pleasure, and only if he be able: for there is no compulsion; all is voluntary. These gifts are, as it were, piety's deposit fund. For they are not taken thence and spent on feasts, and drinking-bouts, and eating-houses, but to support and bury poor people, to supply the wants of boys and girls destitute of means and parents, and of old persons confined now to the house; such, too, as have suffered shipwreck; and if there happen to be any in the mines, or banished to the islands, or shut up in the prisons, for nothing but their fidelity to the cause of God's Church.... But it is mainly the deeds of a love so noble that lead many [in the world] to put a brand on us. ‘See,’ they say, ‘how *they* love one another,’ for they themselves are animated by mutual hatred; ‘how *they* are ready even to die for one another,’ for they themselves will sooner put to death. And they are angry with us also because we call each other “brothers”; for no other reason, I think, than because among them the use of such terms would be assumed to be feigned and pretence.” [Trans. Modified from *ANF*, iii, 46]

And there is no doubt that Tertullian's description of Christian brotherhood and of the noteworthy practice of Christian charity in early Christianity is true. The world *did* notice it, was

nonplussed by it, and was changed as a result of it. Even Julian the Apostate, the 4th century emperor who wished to turn the clock back and make Rome pagan again, recognized that Christian love and brotherhood was a force, an influence that paganism would be hard pressed to counter.

As he inspected his empire and saw how hopeless the condition of paganism was – even the families of pagan priests had gone over to Christianity – he wrote, in something of a pique, to an official in one of the provinces, “Why do we not observe that it is their benevolence to strangers, their care for the graves of the dead, and the pretended holiness of their lives that have done most to increase atheism.” (By “atheism,” of course, Julian means “Christianity.”) “No Jew ever has to beg, and the impious Galileans support not only their own poor but ours as well.” [Cited in Frend, *The Rise of Christianity*, 604, 25] Julian hoped a renewed paganism could over-trump this example of brotherhood and love, but paganism was moribund and Christianity still gathering strength and Julian’s effort came to nothing.

So there is no doubt that the Christians practiced brotherly love in the name and following the example of their Master, and practiced it to a degree that caught the attention of the entire world.

However, it is just as true that Christians *failed* to practice brotherly love and to imitate the example of the Lord Jesus. The heathen historian Ammianus Marcellinus (who died c. A.D. 390) and wrote an admirably even-handed history of the Roman emperors of the 4th century, – indeed, his work is a primary source for our knowledge of Julian’s reign – criticizes the Christians for their dissensions, their bickering and devouring of one another. Julian, Ammianus tells us, in a stroke of political cunning, at the outset of his reign, restored all the Christian clerics who had been banished or exiled to their original positions, precisely because he knew that this would inflame the controversies that separated Christians from one another. As the historian recounts Julian’s decision [XXII, 5.4),

“On this he took a firm stand, to the end that, as this freedom increased their dissension, he might afterwards have no fear of a united populace, knowing as he did from experience that no wild beasts are such enemies to mankind as are most Christians in their deadly hatred of one another.” [Cited in Frend, 601]

And has it not been the same ever since. Christians truly and heroically loving one another and unbelievers as well, and, at one and the same time, betraying the Lord and that, especially, by either ignoring or positively devouring one another. [Think of the days of the Great Awakening, when Whitefield and Wesley and Toplady and so many other great men were transforming not only the English church but English society as well with their message and practice of love, and were, at the same time, far too often, going after one another, sometimes viciously, especially in the case of Wesley and Toplady, and their followers, in turn, drawing up in battle lines.]

What are we to make of this, of this powerful picture in a single chapter, of Christian living so high and beautiful a life on the one hand and so pathetically inept and undistinguished on the other? Of a new commandment that will change the world but, as well, a Peter who looks very much like a Judas?

Well, it is very clear that we are living in a day when increasingly, there is no sympathy for our faith, no bias on its behalf, but rather an overt rejection. We have for a generation been moving into a new era in Western history, paganism is reviving, a Christian view of reality is more and more rejected. Over these past years, more and more of the people who shape and define our culture, have become more and more open in their distaste for Christianity, and, in particular, their distaste for the very notion that Christians live a better, higher, purer, more noble life, that they love more and better than other people. Indeed, the central facts of the Christian faith are now held by many and said by many to represent a very *unloving* tendency and attitude toward others. Or, to put it in terms of our text, who is Peter to judge Judas, who is Peter – who also denied the Lord – to think that he will go to heaven but not Judas? Two examples will suffice. I took them somewhat at random from just two pieces that fell under my eye over the past few days.

The first was an interview in the newspaper with a young actress, Jeneane Garofalo. The questions asked were themselves indicative of the spirit of the age, and one of them was this: “If you could have an X-Men type power and be a superhero, what powers would you have? In the movie, Halle Berry played a superhero named Storm who could make it rain and snow.” Whatever she may have thought of the question, and one hopes she was rolling her eyes at the other end of the telephone, her reply was this. “I would be the Liberator, and I would have the power to change political affiliations. I would have the power to make people liberals and abolish conservatism. Everyone would be in favor of civil rights and women’s rights, it would be great.” I take the last almost certainly to mean that everyone would be in favor of gay rights and abortion.

Here is a modern young woman whose view of reality is diametrically opposed to that of biblical Christianity. And, my point is, she obviously feels that her view is *superior* to that of historic Christianity, more moral, more just. In the terms of our text, she stands with Judas rather than with Peter in rejecting Jesus not out of cowardice but out of the settled reasoning of her mind.

The second example was an article on the renaissance of paganism in our generation and the new pantheism that lies behind the modern worship of tolerance as the supreme virtue. All is God, all is one, and so it is heretical to believe in the sort of moral and ethical distinctions that Christianity insists upon. Paganism, and certainly in its modern form is monistic. It sees reality as a single unity. It is uncongenial to the antithesis Christianity poses between God and his creation, truth and error, good and evil, and right and wrong. And so we have witnessed a shift from a commitment to truth, and in large part to truth as understood in the Christian tradition, to an acceptance of the “all paths” approach, the belief that reality is self-defined and that no one can judge it for someone else. Bill Bradley, erstwhile U.S. Senator and recent presidential candidate, reflects the shift in our culture in his own personal history.

When he was a Princeton undergraduate, a Rhodes Scholar, and then an NBA superstar, he boldly and publicly proclaimed:

“The choice is simple...between the eternal and the passing...between Jesus Christ and the world. *I’ve made my choice.* I love Jesus Christ...How about you?”

That was Bill Bradley in the 60s. But, now, in the 90s he has amended his earlier view.

“Christianity offers one way to achieve inner peace and oneness with...the world. Buddhism, Judaism, Islam, Confucianism, and Hinduism offer others. Increasingly I resist the exclusivity of true believers.” [From P. Jones, “Milestones of Approaching Paganism,” *SCP Newsletter*, 25:2 (Winter 2000/2001) 8]

In the terms of our text, what this amounts to is our society’s inability to distinguish between Judas and Peter, to identify the principle that separates these two traitors as far as heaven is from hell.

And what are we being taught here then, but, finally, the greatest truths of all, all over again.

1. There is first, *sola gratia*, salvation is by grace alone. No Christian, however close to Christ, merits his or her own salvation, lives well enough to have earned God’s favor and eternal life. No, Peter is every Christian here in John 13. We have all betrayed the Lord. We have all succumbed thousands of times to foolishness and overweening pride. We are always overestimating ourselves and underestimating our sin. No, the difference between Peter and Judas is not that one man was a sinner and the other was not, one a traitor and the other was not. That wasn’t the difference at all and it isn’t today. We are all beggars, Christians and non-Christians alike. The only difference between Christians and non-Christians is that Christians have discovered where to find the bread!

2. There is second, *sola fide*, salvation is by faith alone. It is never going to be the case that the Christian gospel, the deity of Christ, the meaning of the cross, the power of the Holy Spirit, and the standard by which men will be judged at the last day will be demonstrated with mathematical certainty before the world. The Christian church has never and will never so live in this world in the true beauty of Christian faith and love that she can say and the world must agree that the church has, by her life, proved the gospel true, QED. No, on the contrary, salvation will always be by faith, by believing things to be real and to be true that cannot be seen, at least certainly not fully seen.

3. And, third, there is *solus Christus*, salvation is by Christ alone. It is not in us, even in our faith, that is found the difference between those who are saved and those who are lost, between Peter and Judas. The difference is Christ. This is the point with which the entire section was introduced in 13:1: “Having loved his own, who were in the world, he now showed them the full extent of his love.” And again in v. 10: you are clean, though not every one of you, a reference to Judas, who was still there in the room.” And, then, again and more explicitly, in v. 18, “I am not referring to all of you. I know those *I have chosen*.” And, then, after the departure of Judas, the Lord turns to the remaining disciples and in a term of real affection he says, in v. 33, “*My children...*” And, then, once more, in v. 36, where the Lord promises his disciples, Peter among them, that they will eventually follow him to heaven. It reminds us of the great declaration of chapter 10: “I give them eternal life and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them from my hand.”

Here is the difference that is accented in the chapter itself: Judas was not in Christ and Peter was, Christ had chosen Peter and not Judas, and because Christ chose him, Peter was brought back to Christ after his fall, he followed Christ in the days and years that followed, he even finally gave up his life for Christ, as long before, in the Upper Room, he had so foolishly boasted he would.

Those facts, my friends – salvation by grace alone, by faith alone, and by Christ alone – are together the truth about this world and the meaning of this world. They are known by the Word of God alone.

But, as the resurrection of the Lord Jesus himself will demonstrate, all the offense that others take to those truths, all the pathetic failure of Christians and the Christian church to live up to them, all the indifference of the world to them, cannot make them one whit less the truth, the absolute and eternal truth, that they are, or shorten by one inch the vast distance that now separates Judas from Peter.