

“The Betrayal of Jesus: Evil with a Human Face”

Jn. 13:18-30,18:1-14

--CEFC 3/27/22;

“That is just evil!”

Do you ever find yourself saying that?

After another one of those school shootings,

or the arrest of a serial pedophile,

or when you hear of a suicide bomber,

who strapped explosives to his body and stepped onto a city bus

jammed with men, women, and children

and then blowing himself up.

“That is just evil!”

The current invasion of Ukraine has many people saying the same thing.

What do we mean when we use that term “evil”?

It means more than that something is simply wrong or bad or even harmful.

That’s because, for some acts—

like sadistic torture, serial killers, Hitler, and the Holocaust,

those descriptors just aren’t enough.

As one philosopher put it:

For those things,

“Prefix your adjectives [such as ‘wrong’ or ‘bad’] with as many ‘very’s as you like;
[You can describe them as very, very, very bad.]
but you still fall short.
Only [the term] ‘evil,’ it seems, will do.”¹

Why is that?

But many people today resist the term “evil”—

I remember the barrage of criticism that then President Ronald Reagan received
when, in a speech to the National Association of Evangelicals
during the Cold War almost forty years ago,
he described the Soviet Union as an “evil empire,”
and the “focus of evil in the modern world.”

“Evil”—no, we can’t use that word.

But we do,

and I think we must.

For the Bible certainly does—

In fact, you see “evil” everywhere in the Bible--
beginning with the garden of Eden
and the forbidden tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

Why are some people reluctant to use the word “evil”?

I think the definition of evil in the Oxford dictionary gives us a clue:

Evil—“profound immorality and wickedness,
especially when regarded as a supernatural force.”

¹ Daniel Haybron 2002b, 260; Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy
(<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/concept-evil/>).

Evil as a supernatural force—it seems to be outside what is “natural.”

The term “evil” suggests that which is so counter to the moral order,
so contrary to what is good and right,
so perverse in its intentions to destroy
that it simply seems inexplicable and almost mysterious.

We often call evil acts “senseless,” don’t we.

They don’t make sense—they are beyond reason.

Evil acts turn our moral sensibilities upside down.

They defy any moral bounds,
especially in the way they denigrate or deny the inherent value,
dare I say, the sanctify of human life.

That’s what makes something evil to us.

And evil seems to be something that transcends individual human choices.

It seems to be a power at work in the world
that manifests itself in human actions.

Hence, the notion of evil as a supernatural force.

The Bible is very clear about that—

Evil is a supernatural force—
a force that appeared in the world
even before the first human act of evil.

And because evil is a moral quality,

the Bible speaks of this power of evil as having a personal center or focus
in the form of a spiritual being called the devil or Satan.

It is the devil who promotes evil—

who stirs it up and prompts it in all sorts of ways,

all in his perverse efforts to spoil God's good creation.

And it doesn't take much in the way of observation at the world around us

to say that he seems to be doing a pretty good job of it.

But the Bible tells us that God is not indifferent or unconcerned or uninvolved in all this.

He himself is the object of the moral rebellion that is at the core of evil.

And the message of the Bible reveals the way

God is working to overcome these evil forces.

We see this so clearly in the Gospels.

At the beginning of his ministry, Jesus is driven into the desert

to go toe-to-toe with the devil,

And there Jesus resists the devil's every effort

to divert him from his divine mission.

Then in his ministry

we see the prominence given to Jesus

powerfully casting out evil spirits, called demons.

And that conflict with the devil

finds its culmination as the Gospel story reaches its conclusion./

The Jews of his day considered the Romans their greatest enemy.

Jesus knew otherwise.

Their real enemy was not Rome, but Satan.

And as their Messiah, he had come to do far more

than merely provide some political liberation.

He came to deal with their true adversary—

the devil and his minions.

That spiritual liberation from the forces of evil

could only come through battle with the prince of this world.

“how can anyone enter a strong man’s house and carry off his possessions

unless he first ties up the strong man?

Then he can plunder his house,” Jesus said (Matt. 12:29).

We often think of Jesus’ death on a cross as the means of the forgiveness of our sins—

and it is that.

But it is more than that—

it is the culmination of Jesus’ conflict with the devil himself.

He must tie up the strong man.

And he does,

but he wins this battle in a most unexpected way.

That dimension of Jesus’ work is at the heart of the episode we focus on this morning—

Jesus’ betrayal at the hands of Judas—

something that is given great attention in all four Gospels.

Here we consider the reality of evil,

the power of evil

the nature of evil,

and finally, God’s victory over it in the cross of Christ.

And as a result, we have hope as we face the evil in our world today.

Turn again with me to John 13.

Judas Iscariot--there is something ominous, almost eerie, about that name.

It is a name that is synonymous with treachery and betrayal--

perhaps the most infamous name in all of human history--

a name, like the name Adolph Hitler,

that has become equated with evil itself.

Who names their son Judas?

I have a grandson named Jude, but certainly not Judas!

Not once in the New Testament is Judas's name mentioned

without some reference

to his act of "**turning Jesus over**" to the authorities--

He is simply called the "**traitor**" (Lk 6:16).

Peter, speaking for the first Christians in the Book of Acts,

refers to Judas's act of "**wickedness**,"

and then to his apostasy from the apostolic ministry--

which he left "**to go where he belongs**" (1:25).

And in this assessment, the apostles are simply echoing

the verdict of their Master--

Jesus says it this way—

"The Son of Man will go just as it is written about him.

But woe to that man who betrays the Son of Man!

It would be better for him if he had not been born" (Matt. 26:24).

In John's Gospel, Jesus refers to Judas as "a devil" (6:70)

and later as "the one doomed to destruction" (17:12).

And Judas is destroyed,

for his death by suicide,

depicted in two different dimensions in Matthew and Acts,

is one of tragic despair--

He goes to his death full of remorse for betraying an innocent man,

yet without the repentance and restoration

that we see in Peter.

John in his Gospel tries to capture the truth about Judas

in one telling phrase--

John 13:30-- "**As soon as Judas had taken the bread**"--

that is, as soon as he realized that Jesus knew what he was planning to do--

"he went out.

And it was night," we read.

"**It was night**"--That's not just a statement of chronology--

it is a statement supremely of theology.

It characterizes the nature of Judas's dark deed.

Earlier in the gospel we had read--

3:19--“This is the verdict: Light has come into the world,
but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil.
Everyone who does evil hates the light,
and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed.”

“It was night.”

Even though the sky was lit
with the brightness of the full moon at Passover,
John’s overwhelming impression
was of the moral darkness of that moment.

As Jesus said to those who came to arrest him--
in Luke 22:53-- “this is your hour --when darkness reigns.”

What Judas had done was dark; it was evil—he was betraying the Son of God;
in the Gospels, Judas Iscariot is presented as evil with a human face.

But as I suggested, evil is a hard concept
for most modern, or postmodern, people to swallow.

Even suicide bombers are sometimes excused—
considered as mere tools in the hands of zealous leaders.

So in many modern interpretations of his role,
even Judas is let off the hook

No, his motives were really good, we’re told--

he was just a little misguided.

Judas really wanted Jesus to succeed.

He was all for Jesus' religious program,
he appreciated his teaching,
but Judas became disillusioned by his methods,
or he became impatient with his plans,
or Judas was just too much of a product of his own background
in the radical, revolutionary politics of that day.

All Judas wanted to do was to force Jesus' hand--

to provoke Jesus to seize power and take control.

Judas was just trying to help him out.

Let's not be so judgmental as to label Judas's act as evil--

mistaken, perhaps, or unfortunate, but not evil.

That's the way you see it all the time--

in productions like *Jesus Christ, Superstar* or *Godspel* or *The Last Temptation of Christ*.

And it even goes back to the 2nd or 3rd century gnostic *Gospel of Judas*.

If we can just explain his motivations in understandable categories,

then we can excuse his behavior,

and, at the same time, de-mystify the notion of evil.

But the biblical Gospels don't do that.

There is no speculation about his motivation,

beyond perhaps the suggestion that his own greed may have played a part.

No, the Bible doesn't let him off the hook--

Judas's act was simply evil.

Our passage this morning affirms the reality of moral evil,

and so must we --

we live in a culture that says most everything is some shade of gray,

but John tells us that in God's world

there is black and white,

light and darkness,

good and evil.

Why is this story of Judas in the Bible?

Why does God's plan have to unfold in this way?

What does it tell about the meaning of the death of Jesus?

Judas's betrayal of Jesus shows us, first of all, **the reality of the evil Jesus was facing**

when he went to the cross.

II. But second, it points us to a deeper dimension of this topic--

that is, **the power of evil**—

there is a personal source of evil at work in the world,

and this author of evil has powerful influence.

Make no mistake, the Gospel writers make no excuses for Judas--

he is held responsible for what he does,

but they also make it clear that he does not act alone.

In the beginning of John 13--as he is setting the scene, John tells us

that when the evening meal was being served,

“the devil had already prompted Judas Iscariot to betray Jesus.” (v.2)

the devil had **“put it into his heart.”**

Judas had already made his plans,

the deal had been struck,

the trap had been set,

now all that was needed was a final decision to go through with it.

Jesus alone knew what was going through Judas’s head

as they reclined around that low-lying table on which their meal was served,

propping themselves up on their left elbow

and reaching for the food with their right hand.

It was a surprise to them all when Jesus announced,

“I tell you the truth, one of you is going to betray me.”

They had no idea what he was talking about or who it might be.

Peter, not surprisingly, takes the initiative

to try to find out what’s going on.

He signals to the disciple reclining just to Jesus’ right--

“the one whom Jesus loved”--probably a reference to John himself.

“Ask him which one he means.”

John then leans back to his left and asks the question.

V.26 --**“Jesus answered, ‘It is the one to whom I will give this piece of bread**

when I have dipped it in the dish.’

Then, dipping the piece of bread, he gave it to Judas Iscariot, son of Simon.”

Sharing one’s food like this was itself a sign of fellowship--

it was a token of companionship.

And it may well be that since Jesus could hand the bread to Judas

that he may have been reclining immediately to his left--

a place of honor.

Perhaps at this point Jesus is making his last appeal to Judas as a friend--

His words, “**What you are about to do, do quickly,**”

may be a demand to Judas to make up his mind

and either respond to Jesus’ friendship or to betray him.²

But when Judas takes the morsel of bread, he chooses the latter,

and we read, that “**Satan entered into him.**”

The diabolical deed is all but done.

Judas was guilty, but he did not act alone--

he acted under the tempting influence of this one called Satan--the Evil One.

Again, this is why our culture has a hard time coming to grips with evil--

evil is more than a choice--it is a force.

There is a mysterious power of evil at work in the world

drawing us away from what is true and good.

And that power subtly twists our motives and perverts our desires,

²Cf. Williams, *Dict. of Jesus*, p. 408.

so that we can't even detect the ways in which our hearts are disordered
and our rational thinking is turned away from the light toward the darkness.

We don't know how Satan got a foothold in Judas's life--

he didn't just overcome him all at once, I'm sure.

Perhaps he worked his way in through his greed

and his occasional pilfering of the disciples' common purse.

Perhaps Judas let his moral guard down

and began to engage in minor acts of moral compromise.

Judas became more and more deaf to the truth

each time he refused to listen to that voice of conscience within.

He becomes hardened until there is no resistance left,

and the evil one enters in and takes control.

Jesus says whoever sins is a slave of sin,

and the devil becomes his master. That is what happens here.

Judas is a victim of the devil's ploys--

but he is a willing victim,

and at this point in his life, Judas is powerless to set himself free.

The Reality of Evil

The Power of Evil

Third, consider the Nature of Evil.

What is evil like? What does it do?

Two characteristics of evil emerge in John's gospel--

A. First, evil denies the truth--

Jesus had described Satan earlier in the gospel as a liar
and the father of lies.

Evil is characterized by a denial of the truth.

How often we see that connection in the Scriptures--
evil and truth are opposites.

1 Cor. 13:6--"Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth."

2 Thess 2:9--Satan will work every sort of evil

"that deceives those who are perishing.

They perish because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. . . .

all will be condemned who have not believed the truth
but have delighted in wickedness."

2 Tim. 3:13 --"evil men and impostors will go from bad to worse,

deceiving and being deceived. "

They will be unable to recognize the truth when they see it,

because they have built up layer upon layer of self-deception.

Evil denies the truth.

It believes a lie.

Isn't that what we see in the suicide bombers

who believe their evil acts will bring them immediate rewards in paradise.

Evil may look very innocent.

And that deceptive, deceitful nature of evil is seen clearly in Judas.

No one in that room except Jesus himself had a clue what Judas was planning to do.

Even Jesus' sign that he was the one
was either ignored or misunderstood
so that no one was suspicious when Judas left the room that night.

He was a beloved disciple,
entrusted with the money bag.
He was a dear friend, seated at the table with Jesus.

Yet he betrayed that trust--

"Surely not I, Lord," Judas declared with all the rest,
reflecting the experience of the Psalmist in Ps. 41:9—
"He who shares my bread has lifted up his heel against me."

The betrayal of a friend--

Nothing could be more duplicitous, more deceptive, than that!

And he would betray Jesus with a kiss, no less.

One problem, of course, is with our stereotype of what evil looks like.

We expect Satan to be ugly and awful with horns on his head
and a horrible scowl on his face.

We expect to be able to recognize evil a mile away.

But the Bible says Satan can disguise himself as an angel of light.

We expect evil people to be monsters--

less than human, and somehow fundamentally different from you or me.

That's what Yehiel Dinur, a Nazi concentration camp survivor, thought

when he testified against Adolf Eichmann in the Nuremberg trials.

Eichmann had been a principal architect of the Holocaust--

an evil man by any standard.

Films of that 1961 trial show Dinur walking into the courtroom,

and then stopping abruptly.

When he saw Eichmann for the first time since the Nazi had sent him to Auschwitz

18 years earlier,

Dinur began to sob uncontrollably, then fainted,

collapsing in a heap on the floor.

Dinur wasn't overcome by hatred,

or fear,

nor was he overwhelmed by his horrid memories.

No, not at all.

As he explained later in an interview,

all at once he realized that Eichmann

was not the god-like army officer he had imagined in his head.

The Eichmann he saw in that courtroom was just an ordinary man.

"I was afraid about myself," Dinur said,

"I saw that I am capable of doing this.

I am . . . exactly like him," he said.

Was Judas so much different from the rest of the disciples?

He couldn't have been--

they didn't have a clue that he would betray the Lord.

He looked to all the world like a committed follower of Jesus.

There is a warning here for us all--

there is “a road to hell leading from the very gates of heaven.”

From the inner circle of Jesus’ followers came an act of unmitigated evil.

Evil deceives and draws us from the truth.

B. And second, and more briefly, we see that

evil is characterized by the destruction of life.

Jesus had said of the devil that he was a murderer from the beginning.

It was he who led Adam and Eve into the sin that led to death.

And the devil continues to foster death wherever he works--

physical death--as here in this act of Judas

that led to the death the Lord Jesus.

But also death of the spirit,

death of the soul,

death in a hundred ways

that would rob us of the abundant life that Jesus came to bring.

Evil denies the truth, and evil destroys life--

“**The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy;**” Jesus said.

“**I have come that [you] may have life, and have it to the full**” (Jn. 10:10).

But there is one more thing I want you to see about evil—

and this may be the most important of all.

The betrayal of Jesus is about evil,
but as we understand the Christian gospel—
when we consider what is happening in the Gospel of John—
even through this evil act of betrayal,
we see that **this gospel story is really about God's victory over evil.**

Again, Jesus is no victim in all this.

He's not caught up in circumstances that he can't do anything about.

The impression that you get throughout the gospel
is that he remains in control.

Jesus knows that Judas is to betray him--

and he doesn't run from it--

it is all part of the mysterious plan of God.

It happens in fulfillment of the Scripture.

In Matthew's gospel, Jesus says,

"The Son of Man will go just as it is written about him" (26:24).

Yes, it was written about him—

going all the way back to those words of God

addressed to the serpent in the garden— Gen. 3:15

"I will put enmity

between you and the woman,

and between your offspring and hers;

he will crush your head,

and you will strike his heel."

In his engagement with the devil,
Jesus is always Lord—he knows what will happen.

That's not to say that Jesus simply goes through the motions
with some stoic resignation,
fatalistically taking whatever comes
as the unalterable will of God decreed from eternity past.

No, Jesus is emotionally involved in all this--
he is **"troubled in spirit"** in v. 21--
at the real pain of seeing his friend turn against him.

And, no doubt, we, too, will experience the pain
of the destructive powers of evil all around us.

But the message of the gospel is that Satan's power does not prevail.
Evil opposes the purposes of God—
yet even evil can be used by God for his good purposes.

It was a series of evil deeds that sent Jesus to the cross,
and there he appeared to be overcome by evil—
but in a surprising turn of events,
it was the devil who was defeated.

He attacked Jesus with all he had,
but Jesus never responds in kind.
Instead, he bore that evil in himself,
and, in a sense, he absorbed it, and so took away its power.

Jesus died as an atoning sacrifice,
taking away our sin,
and so he disarmed the devil of his power to accuse and to condemn.

By his death on the cross Jesus was victorious over evil,
and he brought about the greatest good this world has ever seen.
Satan overreached his hand,
and met his match.

On the cross, in his own death, Jesus gained a victory over sin and death,
and he was victorious over the one who delights in death—the devil himself.

There he bound the strong man so that he could plunder his possessions.
There, according to Paul, Jesus **“disarmed the powers and authorities,
making a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross”** (Col. 2:15).

And in Jesus' glorious resurrection from the grave
God himself gave proof of that victory.

Hebrews speaks of Christ sharing in our humanity
**“so that by his death he might break the power of him
who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—
and free those who all their lives
were held in slavery by their fear of death”** (Heb. 2:14-15).

**“The reason the Son of God appeared
was to destroy the devil’s work,”** John writes (1 John 3:8³).

³ cf. also John 12:31; 16:11; Heb. 2:14-15

Jesus has won the decisive battle over Satan and his evil forces.

but the war is not over.

The devil has been defeated, but he is not yet fully destroyed.

Peter warns us--

"Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion

looking for someone to devour" (1 Pet. 5:8).

He continues to accuse us—

"You call yourself a Christian—after what you did?

You are a joke!"

He sows lies—untruths and half truths,

seeking to deceive and sow doubt.

He magnifies our fears and anxiety—

filling our minds with all the things that could happen to us.

And he stirs up divisions and strife among God's people—

causing us to nurse our hurts with resentment and anger.

We must resist him, Peter urges.

"do not give the devil a foothold," Paul says (Eph. 4:27).

"Put on the full armor of God,

so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes" (Eph. 6:11).

Resist his accusations with the blood of Christ

that cleanses us of all sin.

Resist his lies with the truth of the Scripture,

which is the sword of the Spirit.

Resist his fears and anxieties,

with the gospel truth that in Christ, God is now our heavenly Father
who promises to care for his children.

And we must resist the urge to fight with one another

with the love of the Spirit who now lives in our hearts.

As John writes,

**“Greater is he who is in you
than he who is in the world”** (1 Jn. 4:4).

Yes, we are still engaged in this cosmic conflict of good and evil—

But as those united to Christ

the devil no longer has any authority over us—

We can say, “Be gone, you devil. You have no power over me!”

“I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace,” Jesus said.

“In this world you will have trouble.

But take heart! I have overcome the world” (John 16:33).

Yes, there is still evil in this fallen world,

but the source of that evil has been mortally wounded,

and his final defeat is certain,

for Jesus has taken the worst he could give

and remained faithful to the end—even to the point of death,

But in rising from the dead, death itself is defeated.

And we can be assured that our Lord Jesus will bring his victory to its full completion.

And evil will be no more.

And though this world, with devils filled,
should threaten to undo us,
we will not fear, for God hath willed
his truth to triumph through us.
The Prince of Darkness grim,
we tremble not for him;
his rage we can endure,
for lo, his doom is sure;
one little word shall fell him.

So we pray, “Come quickly, Lord Jesus.”

Prayer—

Closing Song: *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God*

Benediction:

2Tim. 4:18 The Lord will rescue [you] from every evil attack

and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom.

To him be glory for ever and ever. Amen.

Following Jesus to the Cross, #1

Mar. 27, 2022

"Jesus Betrayed: The Human Face of Evil"

John 13:18-30; 18:1-14

The redeeming work of the Messiah is more than just a provision for the forgiveness of our sins. It is nothing less than a victory over the powers of evil in the world. In a culture that is reawakening to the reality of evil, our gospel passage shows what evil looks like with a human face. And the face we see there is our own.

I. The Reality of Evil

II. The Power of Evil

III. The Nature of Evil

A. Evil Denies the Truth

B. Evil Destroys Life

IV. God's Victory Over Evil—
in the Cross of Christ

Will you share in that victory?

Sermon Response:

"Jesus Betrayed: The Human Face of Evil"

John 13:18-30; 18:1-14

- What has prompted you to say, "That is just evil!"? What distinguishes what is "evil" from what is simply "bad" or "harmful"? Why is "evil" such an important category in the Bible?
- What was so evil about Judas's act? Why is equated with the activity of the devil?
- If the devil prompted Judas's act, why is held responsible for it?
- How does Jesus respond to the evil he is confronted with in this story? Why is that significant?
- How does Jesus death and resurrection "destroy the work of the devil" (Col. 2:13-15; 1 Jn. 3:8)?
- How can you appropriate Jesus' defeat of the devil in your life today?