

Judas and Peter

Luke 22-23 (ESV)

Learning often comes not only from following good examples but also refraining from the bad. The Scriptures in many and various ways present both. This learning by comparing and contrasting can be an important tool for acquiring the knowledge of how to be a Christian. The account of the passion of our Lord presents a power illustration of this very learning. Peter and Judas find themselves in a similar situation, yet they end up in completely different outcomes. They both committed a grave sin against Jesus. Yet, one ends up outside the faith and the other is a laudable saint. What was the difference between these two?

PETER, UNLIKE JUDAS, HAD THE REQUIRED FAITH TO BE RESTORED.

In many ways, Peter and Judas were very much alike. They were called by the Lord Jesus to become fishers of men, to preach the Gospel and gather other faithful disciples. They did the work as the Lord prescribed; they proclaimed the kingdom of God; they healed the sick; they cast out demons. Peter was a bit closer to the Lord; he was a part of the inner three (Peter, James, and John). These were given special insight into Jesus (e.g., the Transfiguration). Yet, Judas had special duties as well. He took care of the group's money bag (although reportedly not well), as they traveled from place to place.

They also were similar in their failings. Both of them denied their Lord and Master Jesus. Judas betrayed his Lord by bringing an ambush to arrest him. He betrayed his God by selling him for thirty pieces of silver. He hoped to gain money in place of losing his Lord. Although Peter did not lead his Savior to death, he too betrayed Jesus. When asked if he was a follower, Peter denied any association with his God. While Jesus was rebuking the high priest for questioning Jesus on matters of his teaching (since Jesus taught openly and had many disciples who could be questioned about his teaching), one of his very own disciples (Peter) could not speak a word defending his Lord. Peter made his Lord a liar.

Lastly, Peter and Judas were alike in their contrition, their sorrow over their sin. Judas regretted his decision to betray Jesus; he wished to give back the money he had gained, the reason why he betrayed Jesus. St. Matthew reports, **“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, saying, ‘I have sinned by betraying innocent blood.’ They said, ‘What is that to us? See to it yourself.’”** Judas showed by his actions that he wished to reverse course; he wished he could go back before Satan had tempted him to betray his Lord Jesus. Peter showed his remorse too: **“And the Lord turned and looked at Peter. And Peter remembered the saying of the Lord, how he had said to him, ‘Before the rooster crows today, you will deny me three times.’ And he went out and wept bitterly.”** Peter shed tears in sorrow because he had done exactly what he didn’t wish to do, to reject Jesus publicly, to deny his status as Jesus’ disciple.

Yet, yet, why did these men end up so differently? One was restored and forgiven; the other cut himself off. Peter was chosen as one of the first few witnesses of the Lord’s resurrection. He received a special charge from Jesus to continue in the apostolic ministry when the Lord asked him to “feed His sheep.” Peter was selected as the first apostle to preach the Gospel to a Gentile, to the centurion Cornelius. Peter was restored back in full, even after he had denied his Lord. Judas did not receive that same outcome. He was not restored. Even though he grieved and felt remorse, even though he tried to make amends for his wrong, he ended up committing suicide. St. Matthew writes, **“And throwing down the pieces of silver into the temple, he [Judas] departed, and he went and hanged himself.”** He fulfilled Jesus’ words: **“Not one has been lost, except the son of destruction.”**

What marks the difference between these two? Even though both felt sorry for their sins, both had remorse and wished to do better, only Peter had faith. Yes, Judas felt sorry for his sins. He deeply regretted the wrong that he had done. But, he didn’t look to the right place for help. He did not turn to his Lord Jesus in his desperate need. Yes, it would have been hard for him. How could he have looked in the face the God whom he betrayed? It would have been quite shameful. It would have required him to leave behind any of his pride or self-confidence. But, he didn’t do that. His mind was clouded by the great evil that he had performed. He tried to make all things right by his own power. Judas thought if he paid the 30 pieces of silver back, then he would have atoned for his wrongdoing. Yet, no amount of money could have made up for the sin which he committed.

If Judas is the example for an improper and incomplete repentance, an example which you should not imitate, then St. Peter is. When faced with the reality of his sin, when faced with the wounded glare from his Lord and Master as Peter finished denying him for the third time, Peter did not shrink back into his own guilt and shame. He did not remain secluded in the “what if”s of despair. No, even though he recognized his wrong, even though he wept bitterly, he also knew the Lord’s forgiveness and love. He trusted in that love which would cover a multitude of sins. He knew from his Lord’s promise (“I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners”) that the Lord would not reject his repentance. He took Jesus’ words as true, secure, and trustworthy. So much so that despair could have no grip on St. Peter.

This is the way that you should think. As you meditate on God’s Word and recognize your sin, your rebellion, your wrongdoing, do not remain only in the sorrow over your sin. While remorse and a desire to do better is necessary, so is faith in Jesus’ forgiveness freely offered. That is why this service is more than just “Confession.” If remorse was all that was required, then the service would be very short; and it would end right after you were finished confessing your sinfulness. It is not that way. It is “Confession and Absolution.” It is remorse over sins and the receiving of Christ’s promises through trust. It is contrition and faith. This faith is not conjured up or brought into existence by your own work. It is all the work of God through his promises of forgiveness and his love. So, meditate especially on this word given to you today, “I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” These are the words which God uses to work that simple faith and trust which Peter had, that he could return to the Lord of mercy and still receive his good grace.

Like too many examples in the Bible, Judas is a tragic character. While it might be easy to show contempt for this man for all the evil he did (which was great), it is also gut-wrenching to see how Judas fell into despair. One of the ones who spent three years face-to-face with our Lord could not remember in the hour of need to whom he should turn. The Scriptures lay him and his example side-by-side with another whose life was not so tragic. Peter’s life was honorable, actually. Honorable; not because of his failures, but because he showed the true life of the Christian. A return from remorse to faith, from sorrow to joy, from death to life. Amen.