

Matthew 27:1-10

The Folly of “Almost” Repentance

Have you interrupted yourself? Maybe you’ve introduced a new character and trail off to tell something else about them. Maybe it’s a geographical change or some other scenario. It is not uncommon for our brain to switch from one narrative or memory to another. It would seem, on the surface, Matthew does the same. If the reader were to skip verses 3-10, the narrative flows naturally as these eight verses interrupt the story of what happened to Judas. But Matthew is chasing rabbits. He is a great storyteller.

The text opens with **The Counsel** (vs. 1-2). Following Jesus’s arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus is found guilty of blasphemy by the Sanhedrin in an illegal court. They, however, do not have the legal authority to carry out executions, but must, instead, pressure Pilate. Although Jesus was condemned for blasphemy, his charges were changed to insurrection when presented before the governor. Clearly, their concern isn’t justice, but maintaining their influence and power.

This leads to **The Condemnation** (vs. 3-10). The narrative is suddenly interrupted with this vignette regarding the fate of Judas. According to Matthew, Judas’s remorse came after Jesus was condemned. We can only guess what Judas’s motivation for betraying Jesus was. Perhaps he wanted to lead Jesus toward violence and revolt resulting in taking his throne. Perhaps he believed Jesus would exonerate himself and even win over Jewish leadership. Surely, he may have thought, they’ll see that Jesus was their Messiah. Perhaps it was just about the money. We just don’t know.

The response of the religious elites, however, is despicable (vs. 4b). They couldn’t care less about Jesus nor his humanity. Their hatred blinds them to injustice. To them, Judas was nothing more than a tool. The reader should recoil at their statement. They are despicable people and the fact that they are *religious* leaders charged, by God, to uphold the Law is shameful. According to the Jewish law, this action should have forced a retrial for Jesus. But they don’t care. After returning the coins, Judas, full of regret, goes out and hangs himself. The leaders decide to buy a field to bury Gentiles whom they deem unclean. The irony is rich. In essence, they use unclean money to buy an unclean field to bury an unclean people.

This leads to **The Crucifixion**. It is tempting to see this passage as Matthew simply updating the reader on what happened to Jesus’s betrayer. “He got his just desserts. The end.” But more is going on here. Matthew is a good storyteller. He is an even better theologian. The key is juxtaposition.

The first juxtaposition is that of *Innocence*. In Matthew’s telling of Jesus’s crucifixion, Matthew goes out of his way to present Jesus as innocent. Pilate will wash his hands of Jesus’s guilt. The thief on the cross will confess faith. The centurion will declare him to be the Son of God. This begins with

Judas who declared Jesus's innocence as he returned the money. Theologians call this the Impeccability of Christ. Jesus is like us in every way except without sin. He is the perfect, spotless Lamb of God.

Despite his innocence, Jesus is condemned as guilty. This will become more apparent in the exchange with Barabbas. But compare this scene with other parties. Judas, for his part, *knows* he has betrayed innocent blood. He has turned over the Messiah to the mob. The religious elites, however, are guilty but believe they are innocent. This is what makes the purchase of the field so egregious. While pretending to be unstained, they reek of uncleanness. They claim to keep Israel pure from blasphemers like Jesus but prove to be wicked and unclean.

The second juxtaposition is that of *Repentance*. Matthew purposefully juxtaposes the Denial of Peter with the Remorse of Judas. By doing so, we are given insight into what true repentance is. Peter demonstrates genuine, saving repentance while Judas does not. The difference is not over their regret, but where they turn for healing. Peter runs to Jesus and is cleansed. Judas runs to the religious leaders and is condemned.

Repentance is more than mental regret; it is also spiritual transformation brought about by surrendering our sin to Christ. Repentance is the first step of faith. It is acknowledging that my sin robs me of intimacy with my Maker and either he cleanses me through forgiveness or I die in my sin. Judas chose to die in his sin. Peter chose to live in righteousness.

Finally, there is the juxtaposition of *Death*. Why did Judas die? In the Mosaic Law, false accusations were punished by suffering for the crime the accuser made (see Deu. 19:18-19). So, if you falsely accuse someone of a capital crime, then you must be executed. But what if you betray an innocent man and he is condemned of a capital crime?

But, more specifically, why did Judas choose to hang himself? Why is *that* detail so important? The Mosaic Law, again, makes it clear that "a hanged man is cursed by God" (Deu. 21:23). Judas, sinking in guilt, makes himself a curse by hanging himself from a tree.

The reader is encouraged to juxtapose Judas's death with Jesus's. Both die on a tree. Just as Judas dies under the curse of God, then so does Jesus. The New Testament is aware of this implication often choosing the word "tree" over "cross" (see Acts 5:30, 10:39, 13:29; 1 Peter 2:24). The Apostle Paul makes this abundantly clear when he declares, "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree'" (Galatians 3:13).

On the one hand, the guilty man dies because he betrayed the innocent. On the other hand, the innocent man dies because he loves the guilty. Judas died for himself. Jesus died for others. The ultimate point of the narrative: Jesus is the spotless Lamb of God who dies in the place of sinners like you and me. Will you come and repent?