



Is It I?

When it was evening, he reclined at table with the twelve. And as they were eating, he said, “Truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me.” And they were very sorrowful and began to say to him one after another, “Is it I, Lord?” He answered, “He who has dipped his hand in the dish with me will betray me. The Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that man if he had not been born.” Judas, who would betray him, answered, “Is it I, Rabbi?” He said to him, “You have said so.” (Mt 26:20-25 ESV)

In Old Testament times, God summoned his people to Jerusalem three times a year, in pilgrimage. They were to appear before the Lord at the three high festivals—Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles. You know from the gospels that Jesus himself made that trip a few times, as well as one last time.

Tonight, we begin our annual pilgrimage of sorts. Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of our 40-day trek through the Passion History of our Lord, visiting familiar places along the way and culminating with us gathered, in spirit, in the upper room, at the foot of the cross, and at the entrance of the empty tomb. Forty days—for the 40 days in the wilderness, at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, when he battled temptation to remain sinless for us.

Our Lenten series this year takes us to all those familiar places, and does so by using little phrases—*Three words of truth* each week—that focus our spiritual attention on what is important. And so with Ash Wednesday, we begin our Lenten journey by staring in a mirror at ourselves—reflecting on our sinfulness in the light of God’s Word, but then looking past our own reflection, we see Jesus, standing right there behind us—our Hope, our Cure, our Savior.

Tonight we make this three-word question of the disciples our own: **Is it I?** What’s the answer? 1) **“Yes—it is I whom God calls to repentance.”** But asking it again, **Is it I?** we see that the answer is 2) **“Yes—it is I – for whom the Savior willingly goes to the cross.** May God now bless our Lenten journey through his Word!

I. Yes—it is I whom God calls to repentance.

As we sit tonight in that upper room on Maundy Thursday, we hear Jesus speak many, many comforting things to his disciples as he prepares them for the fierce trial of faith that they would undergo the next day: watching him, their teacher and Lord, hang in agony on the cross. But Jesus also dropped a couple of bombshells on his disciples that night as well.

One of them was this: While they were half-joking around about which one of them was the best of the disciples, Jesus, the Son of God, quietly got up and began to wash their feet, doing the work of a common household servant. I imagine it was pretty quiet all of a sudden; perhaps all they heard was the gentle splash of water in the bowl as each awaited his turn in ashamed silence. Actions sometimes speak louder than words, don’t they?

But then, a second—even bigger—bombshell. As they began their last meal together, Jesus became visibly agitated and then just said it: **“Truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me.”** Boom! . . . And more silence. Then troubled voices filled with concern and shock: “Is it I? Is it I? Is it I? Is it I? Is it I? . . .” And Judas too had to ask, otherwise his silence would have been too revealing; he knew how to cover his tracks: **“Is it I, Rabbi?”**

What’s interesting about the way each disciple asked that question is that each was expecting Jesus to answer, “No, not you.” Yet Matthew says they were all filled with grief over Jesus’ revelation, and so the questions didn’t come from pride or self-confidence (“It couldn’t possibly be me!”). By this point, all the disciples has witnessed Jesus reading hearts and minds of people, including theirs. No, these were questions prompted by doubt and fear. Each one of them was looking for verbal reassurance.

But even asking the question “Is it I?” is revealing. What does it reveal? It reveals what sin has done to us and what sin has the potential to do to us. Although none of us here today is the one who actually betrayed the Lord Jesus to his enemies, each of us has sinned—and daily sins—and as a result, has felt the same fear and doubt the disciples felt. Along with the disciples, each of us cannot brag about how strong we are in our faith. Instead, we simply must realize how powerful a force sin is in our own lives and what awful potential for self-destruction sin brings with it.

How could Judas do it? He had seen Jesus heal the sick. He had seen Jesus walk on water. He had seen Jesus feed thousands . . . and had even helped pick up the leftovers. He had been sent out as a missionary by Jesus and had preached the gospel. He had been given authority to do miracles himself—and probably did many. Jesus simply comments, *“It would have been better for that man if he had not been born.”* How, – how could Judas do it?

How, – how can I do it—after I have heard God speak so clearly in his Word about right and wrong, about being holy in thought, actions, and speech? How can I do it—when I read many examples of people in the Bible and see examples today (perhaps, sadly, in my own family) of those who once believed but chose to turn away from Jesus? Do I really stop to think about what sin can do in my life? I mean, besides the problems and irritations it causes or the frictions in personal relationships, do I really realize that sin can drive faith from my heart and leave me to stand before God’s holy throne when I die with no excuse and an eternity of hell before me? As one of our professors emphatically said, “Sin isn’t like having a cold; it’s a terminal disease.” And every funeral we attend, every cemetery we drive past ought to remind us of that. This day too—*Ash Wednesday*—is a reminder of our own mortality and the judgment that will follow.

“Is it I?”—Yes! It is I whom God calls to repentance, for it is I who am sinful from birth, I who daily sin against my Lord. The letter of Hebrews says that God’s Word is sharp, like a sword, and reveals the thoughts and attitudes of the heart (Heb 4:12). Jesus’ announcement in the upper room did just that and forced the disciples to examine themselves. When they did—when we do—what do we find? Only grief, doubt, and fear when we honestly look at ourselves.

II. Yes—it is I for whom the Savior willingly goes.

But in that upper room there is also Jesus. There, in the person of that God-man Jesus, is love we can’t understand. In love, he does confront us with our sin. But like a doctor diagnosing a disease, Jesus confronts us so that we stop living in denial or entertaining wild dreams about entering heaven because of our own goodness. He does it so that we turn to him and are saved, for apart from him there is no Savior. Although his words reveal who we really are behind the façade that we so often put on, more importantly, his words reveal who *he is* and *why* he came.

“*The Son of Man goes as it is written of him.*” Almost a passing comment by Jesus in this text, but a statement loaded with love and comfort for us! He is “**the Son of Man**”—true man, yet true God. But by taking on our human nature, Jesus became our brother. He shares our humanity. He’s been here on planet Earth. He knows what temptations we face; he faced them all. He knows how we struggle in weakness; he chose to live in weakness too. He knows what grief and sorrow we carry around in our hearts; he knows how frightened by the future we become at times. And he knows all these things not simply because he is true God but because he is true man who experienced life in the sinful world just as we do.

And this Son of Man “*goes as it is written of him.*” These words Matthew records aren’t so much about “the tragedy of Judas” (although it certainly is that); rather, this is Jesus’ story; it’s all about him! This story began before the creation of the world. It’s the history of how he, the Son of God, created all things good in the beginning and how his enemy Satan declared war against him by corrupting the crown of his creation, mankind. In that garden, God stood there with Adam and Eve. He cursed the serpent and then promised to come and make all things right again. Here he is—in the flesh and in the upper room. All the prophecies pointed to him and this night, this weekend. The final, hellish battle was about to commence and so he *goes*.

He *goes* willingly for you, he *goes* for me, he *goes* for all. Although later that night he wrestled in prayer and in fear with his Father about this battle, perfect love drove out all doubts and fears. He *goes* to the mock court; he *goes* to Pilate’s hall; he *goes* to the flogging post; he *goes* through the jeering streets of Jerusalem; he *goes* up gory Golgotha and onto that cross. He *goes* into the tomb, a place utterly foreign to the living God.

But he will also *go* out of the tomb too. And he will tell his frightened followers: “Do not be afraid” (Mt 28:10). Then he will *go* to the right hand of God and rule all things for them—and also for you, for his people. *He will go as it was written* and make all things right again.

Is all this - really for me? Is it this work of Jesus - that washes away my sins? Is it really for me – my forgiveness and peace? It is really for me—a glorious future in heaven, that he (who cannot lie) promises to me and to all who believe in him? **Yes, it is for you, it is for me.** Put your faith in him! Whoever trusts in him will never be put to shame!

This is why we *go* with him—not just during these 40 days of Lent, but every day. We *go*, fighting the good fight of faith by the power of the Spirit. We *go*, struggling against sin; we *go*, clinging to our Savior to lived and died and rose for us and for all. We *go*, in confidence and hope, for this is the truly Christian life; this is the blessed life. Amen.