

God's Sovereignty over Evil, Sin, and Mean People

John 13:18-30

A couple of weeks ago we began a sermon series on "The Farewell Discourse" from John 13-17. These chapters record the things that Jesus did, said, and prayed on the night before His crucifixion. These chapters have heightened significance; they record the essential things that Jesus wanted His disciples to "get" in light of the disillusionment and trauma they'd experience over the next few days.

Today we are going to examine what had to be one of the most heart-wrenching experiences in Jesus' earthly life: His betrayal by Judas. We are told that Jesus had specifically, intentionally chosen Judas as one of His twelve disciples. Luke 6 records that after Jesus went into the mountains and spent an entire night in prayer, He came down and chose the twelve who would be His closest companions and disciples. Jesus prayerfully chose the exact twelve men that He wanted. The last one mentioned is "Judas Iscariot, who became a traitor" (Luke 6:12-16).

A couple of weeks ago we saw in John 13:11 that Jesus lived with the knowledge that Judas would eventually betray Him; He wasn't surprised or caught off guard when it happened. Our passage today describes how Jesus actually forced the action and dismissed Judas to betray Him. John paints the picture of Jesus willingly submitting to God's sovereign plan even though it included His betrayal by Judas.

Jesus' example will be very instructive for us. When we experience evil and sin and mean people the tendency is to wonder, "Where is God? Why did He allow this to happen? Why didn't He rescue me **before** I experienced so much pain?" We can become disillusioned or bitter toward God. Jesus' example suggests that we assume that God is sovereign over our circumstances (that He's in control) and walk by faith.

Let's consider how Jesus trusted in God's sovereignty. Then we'll consider some implications for our lives.

Jesus' trust in the sovereignty of God (John 13:18-30)

In verse 17 Jesus told His disciples that they would be "blessed" if they **do** the things He had instructed (specifically washing one another's feet). In verse 18 He qualifies this statement in an important way:

18 "I do not speak of all of you. I know the ones I have chosen; but *it is* that the Scripture may be fulfilled, 'He who eats My bread has lifted up his heel against Me.'

Jesus **isn't** saying, "I chose eleven of you, but not Judas." In John 6:70 Jesus said, "Did I Myself not choose you, the twelve, and yet one of you is a devil?" Jesus chose Judas with full knowledge that he would conspire with Satan to hand Him over to the authorities. Jesus chose Judas to "fulfill" the Scripture in Psalm 41:9 which said, "He who eats My bread has lifted up his heel against Me."

When the NT authors said that an OT Scripture was “fulfilled” in Jesus, they weren’t always saying that the OT predicted something that was true of Jesus. More often they are saying that Jesus “filled up” or brought to *fullest* expression a theme or even an event recorded in the OT.

This was especially true with themes and events in the life of David. David was a “type” of the Messiah; David’s life foreshadowed many aspects of the Messiah’s life. This was true in terms of David’s reign, David’s suffering, David’s discouragement, David’s sorrow, etc. Here Jesus is saying that He would bring to fullest expression the way in which David was betrayed by those closest to him - people who had eaten his bread in his house. In David’s case, he was betrayed by his own son and by his military leaders. In a similar way Jesus would be betrayed by someone who had traveled with Him, someone who had eaten the Passover meal with Him, someone whose feet He had just washed. Jesus brought to fullest expression David’s experience of being betrayed.

In verse 19 Jesus tells the disciples that He’s letting them know all of this ahead of time so that when it happens, their faith in Him will be strengthened.

19 “From now on I am telling you before *it* comes to pass, so that when it does occur, you may believe that I am *He*.

In retrospect the disciples would realize that Jesus knowingly chose Judas to be one of the twelve. That realization would strengthen their faith. They would believe Jesus’ claim, “I am He” (literally, “I am”). This is very close to being a claim to be God - who is “the Great I Am.” In verse 20 Jesus says:

20 “Truly, truly, I say to you, he who receives whomever I send receives Me; and he who receives Me receives Him who sent Me.”

In chapter 20 Jesus will “send” the disciples into the world just as the Father had sent Him into the world. Here Jesus shows this same connection: the person who receives Jesus’ disciples receives Jesus and the One who had sent Jesus.

So far Jesus had spoken in rather vague terms about being betrayed. In verse 21 He becomes very explicit.

21 When Jesus had said this, He became troubled in spirit, and testified and said, “Truly, truly, I say to you, that one of you will betray Me.” 22 The disciples *began* looking at one another, at a loss *to know* of which one He was speaking.

They had no idea which one of them would betray Jesus. Verse 23 will mention “the disciple whom Jesus loved.” This is the way John, the writer of this gospel, refers to himself. It wasn’t a prideful thing (as if he’s saying, “I’m more loved than the others”) but

a humbling thing (“It’s a stunning fact . . . God’s very Son has set His affection on me.”)
(See Carson, p. 473) Notice the interaction among the disciples:

23 There was reclining on Jesus’ bosom one of His disciples, whom Jesus loved. 24 So Simon Peter gestured to him, and said to him, “Tell *us* who it is of whom He is speaking.” 25 He, leaning back thus on Jesus’ bosom, said to Him, “Lord, who is it?” 26 Jesus then answered, “That is the one for whom I shall dip the morsel and give it to him.” So when He had dipped the morsel, He took and gave it to Judas, *the son* of Simon Iscariot.

The host of a meal would sometimes put his hand into the common bowl, take a choice piece of bread or meat, dip it into some type of sauce/puree, and hand it to a guest as a gesture of friendship or honor. Jesus handed such a morsel to Judas, indicating that he would be the one to betray Him. Some see Jesus extending Judas one last offer of friendship and love. But instead of being drawn to Jesus, Judas’ heart is hardened and his role is fixed:

27 After the morsel, Satan then entered into him. Therefore Jesus said to him, “What you do, do quickly.”

Satan now had full possession of Judas. Therefore Jesus commands Judas to do quickly what had purposed to do. The other eleven disciples didn’t understand.

28 Now no one of those reclining *at the table* knew for what purpose He had said this to him. 29 For some were supposing, because Judas had the money box, that Jesus was saying to him, “Buy the things we have need of for the feast”; or else, that he should give something to the poor.

They couldn’t see the obvious meaning of Jesus’ words to Judas, so they began to speculate about what Jesus might be telling Judas to do. They thought that Jesus was either telling Judas to go buy the food needed for the Feast of Unleavened Bread (which began that night and lasted for seven days) or to give money to the poor (something commonly done on Passover night). But we as readers know that Jesus was telling Judas to go carry out the satanic plot to betray Him into the hands of the Romans.

John’s comment in verse 30 is ominous:

30 So after receiving the morsel he went out immediately; and it was night.

Certainly it was after sunset, so it was literally night. But it was also night figuratively. The gospel of John depicts Jesus as the light of the world who came into the darkness. John 1:5 stated:

5 The Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it.

John 3:19 reads:

19 “This is the judgment, that the Light has come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the Light, for their deeds were evil.

Judas’s betrayal reflects the spiritual darkness/evil that did not and could not understand who Jesus was.

Jesus believed that God was sovereign even over the evil surrounding Judas’ betrayal. Throughout His suffering, He “entrusted Himself” to God. He trusted God throughout.

Our trust in the sovereignty of God (in response to evil, sin, and mean people):

Jesus’ example is instructive for us because in varying degrees we also experience evil and sin and mean people in this world. We need to live our lives with the conviction and confidence that God is sovereign in our circumstances. To honor God in the midst of such circumstances you don’t have to understand everything that is happening to you. You simply need to walk by faith (Hebrews 11:6), believing that He is in control of what you’re experiencing.

And so, before we go further, I’d like you to identify a circumstance or a relationship in which you need to trust in the sovereignty of God. Have you experienced betrayal in a friendship, in a marriage, in the church, in the workplace? Have you been the victim of people who have done evil things to you or to someone you love? Or maybe for you it’s more a matter of being around mean people who say and do things that are hurtful to you. When we experience some obvious blessing or when people are kind and gracious to us, it’s easy to say, “God is good and sovereign.” But how do we trust that God is sovereign when we experience evil, sin, and mean people? Jesus’ experience with Judas (as well as other Scriptures) suggest the follow responses.

First, don’t be afraid of being “troubled in spirit.” We read in verse 21 that as Jesus declared, “. . . one of you will betray Me,” that “He became troubled in spirit.” Jesus felt the full weight of the evil that He was about to experience. He didn’t keep a stiff upper lip; He didn’t try to “keep it together” for the disciples. No, He became troubled in spirit. This was evidence of His spiritual health and wholeness. He didn’t try to cover up or hide from His pain; He faced it head-on.

You and I are Christlike when we are troubled in spirit over the things that grieve the heart of God. When we experience things that are troubling, it’s appropriate to be troubled in spirit (which is different from being angry or anxious). It is a sign of spiritual health when our emotions reflect spiritual realities.

For me tears are sometimes an indicator that my heart is in the right place. I’m not putting this on each of you; I’m not saying that the more you cry the closer you are to God. But for me sometime when I’m calloused toward things that are legitimately troubling, it’s an indicator that my heart isn’t soft toward God.

One way that we express to God, “I believe that you are sovereign over my circumstances,” is by entering into those circumstances emotionally. We are saying to God, “You have every right to allow pain and suffering into my life. . . I am not going to run from it.” Jesus example makes clear that we shouldn’t be afraid of being troubled in heart. It can humble us, lead us into prayer, make us sensitive to what God is doing, etc.

Second, consider how God is refining you. Simply being open to the possibility that God can do deep things in your life in the midst of suffering is evidence of believing that He is sovereign. A common response to evil, sin, and mean people is anger - even toward God. “God, don’t you love me enough to shield me from evil, sin, and mean people? Haven’t I endured enough in my life?” But Jesus’ response suggests that we assume that God is sovereign and allow Him to refine us through our suffering.

Of course Jesus didn’t need to be refined in ways that we do (since He was sinless), but we read in Hebrews that even Jesus “learned obedience through the things that He suffered” (Hebrews 5:8). Somehow His suffering added experiential obedience to His holiness. In our case, since we do have sin, we should assume that God wants to use even the evil and sin and mean people that we experience to refine us - to burn away selfishness, bitterness, jealousy, hatred, etc. Here’s what James 1:2–3 says:

2 Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, 3 knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance.

We demonstrate faith that God is sovereign when we acknowledge that God has every right to refine us through the trials we experience.

I can think back to times when I’ve had to endure what I perceived to be mistreatment by others. At the time I just wanted it to end. But now, even though I would never want to go through those trials again, I wouldn’t trade the lessons learned for anything. God taught me things in the “darkness” that I wouldn’t have learned any other time. He’s sovereign. He has a right to refine us through trials.

Third, seek opportunities to “love your enemies.” Few things say to God, “I trust that You are sovereign,” like loving your enemies - people who’ve betrayed you, persecuted you, been mean to you, etc. After being betrayed, Jesus loved His enemies by praying for them (“Father forgive them. . .”), by speaking truth to them, and ultimately by dying for them (“While we were God’s enemies Christ died for us.”). Of course Jesus tells us to love our enemies as well. This is a basic aspect of being “Christlike.”

You are entering into a very subversive activity when you love your enemies. It’s very predictable what will happen when you hate your enemies: they will hate you back. But all bets are off if you love your enemies. Judas wasn’t softened by Jesus’ love, but Paul was. When Paul was breathing threats against Christians and on his way to Damascus to persecute the Christians there, Jesus blinded him and enlisted people like Ananias and Barnabas to befriend him.

Loving your enemies doesn't guarantee any results whatsoever. But it does do a couple of things. First, it give you the satisfaction of being obedient. Second, it opens up the possibility that God will do something ***miraculous*** in the life of the other person. I suspect that some of you here today came to Christ in part because of the way Christians loved you when you weren't very lovely.

As an expression of Christlikeness, I'd like you to consider the possibility of actively, intentionally loving someone who has sinned against you. This will look different for different circumstances. But if God is prompting you to love your enemy, don't ignore it.

Conclusion. Trusting God's sovereignty when we've been wronged is a core aspect of being Christlike; it's one of the ways that we share "the fellowship of His sufferings." Jesus' example should give us courage and boldness when we encounter evil, sin, and meanness. We shouldn't run from it. We shouldn't dread it. Rather, we enter into our circumstances 1) emotionally, 2) learning everything we possibly can, and 3) trusting that God might do something greater than we imagined - even in the lives of our enemies.