

## *Kiss the Son*

A sermon preached by Dr. John Clayton at Covenant Presbyterian Church of Fort Smith, Arkansas on February 28, 2021.

While he was still speaking, Judas came, one of the twelve, and with him a great crowd with swords and clubs, from the chief priests and the elders of the people. Now the betrayer had given them a sign, saying, “The one I will kiss is the man; seize him.” And he came up to Jesus at once and said, “Greetings, Rabbi!” And he kissed him. Jesus said to him, “Friend, do what you came to do.” Then they came up and laid hands on Jesus and seized him. And behold, one of those who were with Jesus stretched out his hand and drew his sword and struck the servant of the high priest and cut off his ear. Then Jesus said to him, “Put your sword back into its place. For all who take the sword will perish by the sword. Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels? But how then should the Scriptures be fulfilled, that it must be so?” At that hour Jesus said to the crowds, “Have you come out as against a robber, with swords and clubs to capture me? Day after day I sat in the temple teaching, and you did not seize me. But all this has taken place that the Scriptures of the prophets might be fulfilled.” Then all the disciples left him and fled. Then those who had seized Jesus led him to Caiaphas the high priest, where the scribes and the elders had gathered. And Peter was following him at a distance, as far as the courtyard of the high priest, and going inside he sat with the guards to see the end. Now the chief priests and the whole council were seeking false testimony against Jesus that they might put him to death, but they found none, though many false witnesses came forward. At last two came forward and said, “This man said, ‘I am able to destroy the temple of God, and to rebuild it in three days.’” And the high priest stood up and said, “Have you no answer to make? What is it that these men testify against you?” But Jesus remained silent. And the high priest said to him, “I adjure you by the living God, tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God.” Jesus said to him, “You have said so. But I tell you, from now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven.” Then the high priest tore his robes and said, “He has uttered blasphemy. What further witnesses do we need? You have now heard his blasphemy. What is your judgment?” They answered, “He deserves death.” Then they spit in his face and struck him. And some slapped him, saying, “Prophecy to us, you Christ! Who is it that struck you?” (Matthew 26:47–68).<sup>1</sup>

From their last Passover meal, Jesus led his disciples to Gethsemane, all of his disciples except one. Surrounded by those sworn to serve and protect him, Jesus prayed as they slept. Wrestling with the weight of his prophesied passion, Jesus earnestly prayed for the cup to pass, a passionate plea submitted to his Father’s will.

As the eleven rested in the garden, Jesus’ betrayer was hard at work, mobilizing a mob with swords and clubs. They were not followers but a faction, pawns of the polis. In fact, out of a twelve-person line up, they could not pick out our Lord. But Judas could. And so, he had given them a secret sign, saying, “The one I will kiss is the man; seize him.”

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<sup>1</sup> Unless referenced otherwise, all Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2001).

## **The Purpose of a Kiss**

As he had acknowledged him at the Passover table, so he addresses him in the dark: “Greetings, Rabbi!” For all that Judas heard, witnessed, and experienced, Jesus had never been anything more than his teacher. How easy it is to think that mere exposure to Christ, his way and his Word, renders one a Christian; it is only through conversion that the Rabbi becomes our Lord. Even what Jesus taught, Judas had not learned; he never had eyes to see or ears to hear.

In full confidence in his sinful flesh as his commander and captor, Judas betrays Jesus with a sign of brotherly affection, a kiss. It is a sign that soberly sums up Judas’ discipleship. He looked like a follower of Christ, served as a follower of Christ, and could even use a sign of the brotherly love of a follower of Christ, but it was disingenuous, a deception. And so, like all of fallen humankind, he takes something beautiful and distorts it.

In his song *Why*, Michael Card solemnly asks,

Why did it have to be a friend  
Who chose to betray the Lord?  
And why did he use a kiss to show them  
That’s not what a kiss is for?

Only a friend can betray a friend  
A stranger has nothing to gain  
And only a friend comes close enough  
To ever cause so much pain.<sup>2</sup>

Judas chose the most intimate of signs to betray our Lord, and yet what he meant for evil God meant for good. Judas’ kiss would lead to Jesus’ trial and crucifixion. It would also lead to our redemption.

In Psalm 85, the psalmist sings of the Lord’s favor in forgiving the iniquity of his people, covering all their sin, withdrawing his wrath, turning away his “hot anger” (Ps. 85:2-3). What is the basis of such unmerited favor? It is the embrace of God’s steadfast love and faithfulness, where “righteousness and peace kiss each other” (Ps. 85:10). While Judas used a kiss to betray our Lord, it was in the kiss of God’s justice and mercy upon the cross of Christ that reconciled us to God. In fact, it is through this kiss that we who were not a people have become God’s people, indeed his children (1 Pet. 2:10). As prodigals, through Christ our Father not only embraces but kisses us, not as a betrayer but as the beloved (Luke 15:20).

## **The Purpose of a Sword**

In contrast to brotherly love, Peter is ready for a fight. He who fell asleep praying within an hour has his sword drawn in a second. Revealing himself to be a fisherman not a fighter, Peter saves a life but severs an ear. He can’t stay awake to pray; he can’t wield a sword in a fight; what is a

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<sup>2</sup> Michael Card, “Why,” Song Lyrics, accessed February 20, 2021, <http://www.songlyrics.com/michael-card/why-lyrics/>.

disciple to do? How often we are willing to fight for the cause of Christ and yet so forgetful of his Word.

On at least three occasions, Jesus told his disciples of what would come, even revealing the prophecy of Zechariah: “I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered” (Matt. 26:31). But in the heat of the moment, Peter will do it his way. He will fight for Christ even if he is the last man standing, something Jesus never asked him to do.

The Gospel of Luke tells that Jesus healed the wounded man’s ear, revealing in that moment both his mercy and identity. But he does more than heal, he teaches, saying to his wayward disciple, “Put your sword back into its place. For all who take the sword will perish by the sword.” It is a timely aphorism then and now, revealing that indeed “our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world rulers of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavens” (Eph. 6:12 NET). The gospel does not advance nor is the kingdom of heaven revealed through worldly warfare.

But, to be clear, Jesus’ aphorism is not a plea for pacifism. There is a purpose of the sword, as Paul explains in Romans,

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, for he is God’s servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God’s wrath on the wrongdoer. Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God’s wrath but also for the sake of conscience (Romans 13:1–5).

God does indeed work through the secular state, and he does use the sword through the authority he gives, for Christian and non-Christian alike. But it is not an individual authority. The command given to Peter and the warning issued to us acknowledges the purpose of the sword, pertinent to the kingdoms of this world but not the kingdom of heaven.

Let this be a point of self-examination: How often are we like Peter, brandishing our swords of defense, when legions of angels stand ready, willing and able? Jesus didn’t need Peter’s heroics or his sword, and he doesn’t need yours either. In fact, if you’re always looking to fight for Christ, perhaps you should ask what you’re really fighting for. Did Jesus ask you to fight for it? And is the gospel advanced, hearts converted, and Christ exalted in it? Sheath the sword and set your mind on the things above, not on earthly things, or means (Col. 3:2).

### **The Purpose of a Trial**

Given the zeal of Israel’s leaders for certain laws, such as the Sabbath, we might presume the same consideration for a legal trial. This, of course, is to presume too much. It was only the laws

that served their purpose and agenda that mattered. They would keep their Sabbath and murder the Christ. How often we fixate on a morality to our pleasing, ignoring what pleases the Lord. Such was the case in the mock trial of Jesus.

The purpose of a trial is to determine the truth (and nothing but the truth), but in the trial before Caiaphas, the high priest, false testimony became their “truth.” They wanted more than a conviction; they wanted Jesus of Nazareth dead. Yet in their manipulation of the truth, none could be found, “though many false witnesses could be found.” Given Jesus’ perfect righteousness, their only hope would be to manipulate his word, and so two step forward and claim, “This man said, ‘I am able to destroy the temple of God, and to rebuild it in three days.’” A lie confidently stated is nothing new, nor is the ready acceptance of it.

The truth is that Jesus did not say, “I am able to destroy the temple of God...” but, replying to the Jews, said, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up” (John 2:19), referring not to the temple mound but his own body, crucified, buried, and resurrected. But who cares about accuracy when you are being told what you want to hear? Why seek the truth when your echo chamber happily confirms your bias? Who cares about the truth when you have a nation to save? In distorting the word of Christ, they could conveniently confirm a conviction, further revealing the depth of their perversion.

Of course, anyone can manipulate Scripture, twisting and turning, proof texting for prejudice, but the more you finagle the Word to *your* fancy, the more deceived *you* become. Everyone in that courtroom embraced the distortion of the truth, because it helped them protect their country, their way of life, their religion. Everyone relished the entrapment. Who cares about the truth when you can finally get your way? Perhaps you must sacrifice the truth, quite literally, to get what you want.

### **The Purpose of a Testimony**

Proverbs says, “When words are many, transgression is not lacking, but whoever restrains his lips is prudent” (Prov. 10:19). As the defendant, Jesus remains silent. He knows it all is a set-up, that the false testimony is contrived, that the trial is anything but truth-seeking. This was clear from his words to the mob in the garden: “Have you come out as against a robber, with swords and clubs to capture me? Day after day I sat in the temple teaching, and you did not seize me.” Jesus knows that it is all a matter of deception. He knows their motive; the truth will not change their hearts. He also knows that everything is going according to plan, saying, “But all this has taken place that the Scriptures of the prophets might be fulfilled.”

In a trial that should be truth-seeking, Truth stands in their midst, teaching loudly through silence. When everyone has bought the bias, there is no sense in arguing. But silence exasperates those who need bias-confirmation, witnessed in Caiaphas’ words. It’s as if he can’t handle the silence, demanding, “I adjure you by the living God, tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God.” Jesus’ answer is palpable in the original language but not as clear in English, translated, “You have said so,” or “You have said it yourself” (NET); or, as I translate it, “You said it!” When Jesus hears the truth, he acknowledges it.

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However, Jesus does more than acknowledge his identity, he reveals what is to come after his death, burial, and resurrection: “I tell you, from now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven.” It is a testimony that begins at this trial, confirmed by his resurrection, testified to by Stephen, and witnessed at Pentecost. And it is but a glimpse of judgment to come, something no one else in that room considers.

The purpose of a testimony is to tell the truth, and Jesus tells it. And they hate it. They hate him. Ripping their clothes, they rage at his supposed blasphemy. And yet, false testimony and mendacious rhetoric is not transformed into truth by showmanship and shouting. You can't shout the truth into existence, but you can convince those who hear what they want to hear. The verdict is unanimous: “He deserves death.”

On that night, the leaders of the land behaved like demons from the depth, their total depravity utterly revealed. They slapped him, punched him, spit on him, and mocked our Lord. If they could have executed him in the court room they would have. And yet, as Peter would later tell the church, “When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly” (1 Pet. 2:23). Jesus knew his purpose and his Father's plan, to save the lost, like you and me.

What began in the garden with Judas' kiss proceeded to the cross, where “He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed” (1 Pet. 2:24). The love of Christ did not deserve a kiss of betrayal but of love. So, let us agree with the words of the second psalm which tells us, “Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and ye perish from the way, when his wrath is kindled but a little. Blessed are all they that put their trust in him” (Ps. 2:12 KJV). By God's grace through faith, let us kiss the Son indeed!