
Biblical Studies / Classic

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Why are you here?

“Jesus said to him, “Friend, do what you came to do.” Then they came up and laid hands on Jesus and seized him.”

(Matthew 26:50, ESV)

Summary: Intro – translation issue – the adjective “friend” – the clause, lit. *“that for which you are here”* – the clause in secular usage – Matthew’s use of the clause – one further suggestion – conclusion.

These are the words spoken by Jesus to Judas when he received the traitor's kiss in Gethsemane, as rendered in the Revised Standard Version (RSV) and the KJV. Almost certainly, they are a mistranslation.

The alternative rendering given in the margin or footnote [of the RSV] is better, "do that for which you have come."

Similarly, the New English Bible (NEB) text renders, "Friend, do what you are here to do," while the NIV says, "Friend, do what you came for." The ESV also renders it as, "*Friend, do what you came to do.*"

The Greek word translated "friend" is used by Matthew alone of the New Testament writers; it might be translated

"companion," "comrade," or "mate."

Judas is the only person Jesus addresses in this way. The same vocative (the grammatical case used for addressing someone) appears in two parables: once when the owner of the vineyard addresses the workman who protested the generous pay of the last-hired men (Matthew 20:13), and again when the king giving a marriage feast for his son addresses the man who came without a wedding garment (Matthew 22:12).

On Jesus's lips, it was particularly fitting as a form of address to a man who, an hour or two earlier, had sat at the table with him and "dipped his hand in the dish" with him (Matthew 26:23).

The rest of the sentence might be translated literally as "that for which you are here." It appears to be an adjectival

clause; the main clause would then be an imperative like "do."

The phrase appears as an inscription on a few goblets from the New Testament era, suitable for use at drinking parties, where the main verb used is "*be of good cheer*" or "enjoy yourself." The complete inscription means "enjoy yourself; that's what you're here for."

Matthew uses the clause in a far more solemn, indeed tragic, context, but his meaning is clarified by the inscription on the goblets. Jesus essentially says to Judas, "You know what you are here for, get on with it!"

One further suggestion is that the clause might be an exclamation, as though Jesus said, "*Friend, what a thing you are here for!*" But it is best to take it as an adjectival clause, and to render the

words, "Friend, do what you have come to do."

So, in conclusion, is this saying of Jesus a question, as the RSV and KJV render it? Or is it an exclamation, or, as we argue here, an adjectival clause—describing what Judas came to do?