

Sermons on Matthew

Denying Jesus

Matthew 26:69-75

With Study Questions

*Pastor Paul Viggiano
Branch of Hope Church
2370 W. Carson Street, #100
Torrance, CA 90501
(310) 212-6999
pastorpaul@integrity.com
www.branchofhope.org
8/17/2008*

Denying Jesus

Matthew 26:69-75

Now Peter sat outside in the courtyard. And a servant girl came to him, saying, "You also were with Jesus of Galilee."⁷⁰ But he denied it before *them* all, saying, "I do not know what you are saying."⁷¹ And when he had gone out to the gateway, another *girl* saw him and said to those *who were there*, "This *fellow* also was with Jesus of Nazareth."⁷² But again he denied with an oath, "I do not know the Man!"⁷³ And a little later those who stood by came up and said to Peter, "Surely you also are *one* of them, for your speech betrays you."⁷⁴ Then he began to curse and swear, *saying*, "I do not know the Man!" Immediately a rooster crowed.⁷⁵ And Peter remembered the word of Jesus who had said to him, "Before the rooster crows, you will deny Me three times." So he went out and wept bitterly (Matthew 26:69-75).

Introduction

We like to think of ourselves as "the hero." We read novels, watch movies, read the Bible and root for the champion to be brave, make the right choices and be undaunted by the forces of evil – we identify with him. From the comfort of our easy chairs we fantasize that we would succeed where others have failed.

How many of us have secretly thought we, unlike Adam, would never have eaten the fruit? We would not have rejected the preaching of Noah, contributed to the building of the tower of Babel, grumbled at Moses, cheated with Bathsheba or, as we see in this text, denied our Savior.

But there are so many components to the adversities in life we ignore or forget. It seldom dawns on us that the courageous soldier often battles more than another courageous soldier. He battles fatigue, hunger, and sickness.

My wife and some of her friends just scaled Mt. Whitney, the highest mountain in the continental United States. Getting in shape for the hike doesn't protect you from all hardship. There is a thing called altitude sickness that's unpredictable. Seventy percent of the people who attempt

the hike fail! Of course, I thought if I attempted the hike I would never fail. Then, a few days after her return home I took ill. I had flu-like, dizzy, nauseous symptoms. I had a hard time walking from one room to the other. As I sat miserably in my bedroom I asked myself how I would do if this is how I felt on the mountain. My answer – curl up and be airlifted to the nearest Marriott.

Peter never thought himself capable of the behavior we observe in this passage. He had confidently declared, **“Even if all are made to stumble because of You, I will never be made to stumble” (Matthew 26:33)**. His courage was manifested in his willingness to engage the great multitude who had come to arrest Jesus by cutting off the ear of the servant of the high priest (Matthew 26:51).

But as they moved toward the cross, the courage of Peter and all the disciples waned. As Jesus predicted, they all would forsake Him and flee (Matthew 26:56). There was a darkness to the cross that our minds find hard to engage. (More on that in a moment.)

Matthew weaved the record of Peter’s confrontation in with the trial of Jesus before Caiaphas. In verses 57 and 58 of this chapter we read:

And those who had laid hold of Jesus led *Him* away to Caiaphas the high priest, where the scribes and the elders were assembled. ⁵⁸ But Peter followed Him at a distance to the high priest’s courtyard. And he went in and sat with the servants to see the end (Matthew 26:57, 58).

Matthew then goes on to record the interaction between Jesus and the high priest without mentioning Peter again until now. Of course the differences between Jesus and Peter are stark.

Now Peter sat outside in the courtyard. And a servant girl came to him, saying, “You also were with Jesus of Galilee.”⁷⁰ But he denied it before *them* all, saying, “I do not know what you are saying.”⁷¹ And when he had gone out to the gateway, another *girl* saw him and said to those *who were there*, “This *fellow* also was with Jesus of Nazareth.” ⁷² But again he denied with an oath, “I do not know the Man!” ⁷³ And a little later those who stood by came up and said to Peter, “Surely you also are *one* of them, for your speech betrays

you.”⁷⁴ Then he began to curse and swear, *saying*, “I do not know the Man!” Immediately a rooster crowed (Matthew 26:69-74).

Jesus and Peter – the Distinctions

Where Jesus stood courageously before the entire council, Peter trembled before servant girls. Matthew could have merely mentioned the little mob forming against Peter. It seemed his point was to show how easily Peter was overcome with fear.

If you have run with the footmen, and they have wearied you, then how can you contend with horses? (Jeremiah 12:5)

There are various environments that test the mettle of one’s faith. Peter seemed unprepared for the fear that would subdue him. Have you ever been so petrified by a woman’s voice that you would immediately deny your Master? Let us pray to be ready always to testify of our true convictions.

Where Jesus, when put under oath, proclaimed words of truth, power and judgment, Peter’s only oath was designed to distance himself from his Lord and Savior. And, as if an oath were insufficient, he curses and swears. This is not to be understood as foul language but as a legal way of confirming one’s conviction – “if I am lying, may I be accursed!”

Where Jesus, when asked if He were the Christ, answered, “**It is as you said**” (Matthew 26:64), Peter, when asked if he knew the Christ, crescendoes from feigned ignorance (“**I do not know what you are saying,**” v. 70) to committed denial.

Where Jesus embraced a conviction leading to His death, Peter was halted by mere guilt by association. Where Jesus went from silent to bold, Peter went from timid to terrified. And the list goes on.

Why This Fear?

Why this horror? Why was Peter beset by inexplicable trepidation? I am under the conviction that there is not a single member of this fallen race who would have fared better than Peter. This event should not be considered similar to the normal foreboding of persecution and martyrdom.

It was of this event that Jesus spoke when He explained to Peter, **“Satan has asked for you, that he may sift you as wheat” (Luke 22:31).** There was a darkness attached to Golgotha – to the cross – that would melt the hearts of those with even the most firm convictions. No man approaches the cross with Christ. No man can even feign contribution to his own redemption. It was God alone who sacrificed the animals to cover Adam and Eve; it was God alone who brought life to the barren womb of Sarah that her child might be the Redeemer; it was by the good favor of God alone that Israel was not judged like Sodom that the seed of the Redeemer would be preserved.

And the unique role of Jesus did not change at His birth. His own people received Him not (John 1:11), His closest friends and companions in ministry betrayed and deserted Him (Matthew 26:49, 56), the high priest who served to prefigure the Mediator between God and men, and the church council who represented the whole Church of God, would reject the very cornerstone (Psalm 118:22) of redemption. Soon the only remaining institution – the state – would deal the final blow to humanity’s sole innocent citizen.

We thus emphasize the *solas* of true deliverance – that man is saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone who is revealed through the Scriptures alone to the glory of God alone. Jesus would have no advocates – nor would He need one. Peter was sifted like wheat by the devil.

A Damnable Denial?

It is no minor point here to note that not all denials are damnable. There was great dispute in the early church – during times of severe persecution – as to whether one who denied his faith had forfeited his soul. It’s easy to understand given the words of Jesus:

Therefore whoever confesses Me before men, him I will also confess before My Father who is in heaven. ³³ But whoever denies Me before men, him I will also deny before My Father who is in heaven (Matthew 10:32, 33).

But given Peter's repentance and reacceptance as an apostle, it would appear that the type of denial Jesus is speaking of is a willful, prolonged and committed denial – which brings us to our final point.

Peter and Judas – the Distinctions

We have observed the distinctions between the righteous courage of Jesus and the fearful denials of Peter. I would like to finish by observing some distinctions between Peter and Judas. Both of them, like us all, at some level had forsaken their faith – their Savior – their Lord. A bystander might see little difference between the two. But the differences are as wide as heaven from hell so it is worth looking at.

Peter planned to succeed where Judas planned to betray (*cf.* John 12:6). Peter planned to be faithful and failed; Judas planned to be unfaithful and succeeded. Let us not mistake weakness for hypocrisy (a very common mistake). The weakness of the flesh is common to man but hypocrisy is a willful pretending to be something you're not. Peter may have been weak, but he was sincere. Judas was not; he had other motives.

Both Peter and Judas felt badly about what they did. Compare:

And Peter remembered the word of Jesus who had said to him, "Before the rooster crows, you will deny Me three times." So he went out and wept bitterly (Matthew 26:69-75).

Then Judas, His betrayer, seeing that He had been condemned, was remorseful and brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and elders, ⁴ saying, "I have sinned by betraying innocent blood." (Matthew 27:3, 4a)

But clearly, just feeling badly is insufficient for redemption. Some sorrow is good; other sorrow betrays self-absorption. Paul explains:

For godly sorrow produces repentance *leading* to salvation, not to be regretted; but the sorrow of the world produces death (2 Corinthians 7:10).

To have godly sorrow does not mean to engage in a state of maudlin or morbid despair. Godly sorrow is productive – it produces repentance.

And repentance, although it includes seeking to undo the damage (Judas brought back the silver), does not merely mean to seek to make things right.

True repentance is not merely turning from something but turning to something – or more accurately to someone. This is the first, most important and eternally significant distinction between Peter and Judas – Judas went to a field and hanged himself (Matthew 27:5); Peter went back to Jesus. We, in our weakness and failure, are to ever turn to Christ.

Through the Lord's mercies we are not consumed, because His compassions fail not. ²³ They are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness. ²⁴ "The Lord is my portion," says my soul, "therefore I hope in Him!" (Lamentations 3:22-24)

It was not the magnitude of the sin of Judas that led him to despair, death and damnation. It was his unwillingness to come to a God of compassion and receive mercy. Biblical and comforting are the words of our confession of faith:

As there is no sin so small, but it deserves damnation; (Rom. 6:23, Rom. 5:12, Matt. 12:36) so there is no sin so great, that it can bring damnation upon those who truly repent. (Isa. 55:7, Rom. 8:1, Isa. 1:16,18).¹

Finally, lest we conclude that it was mere character traits which distinguished two men of extremely divergent features and destinies, we must observe the distinction wrought by the good pleasure of God in the hidden chambers of eternity. And this is seen in Jesus' warning and consoling of Peter in the passage earlier read:

And the Lord said, "Simon, Simon! Indeed, Satan has asked for you, that he may sift *you* as wheat. ³² But I have prayed for you, that your faith should not fail; and when you have returned to *Me*, strengthen your brethren." (Luke 22:31, 32)

¹The Westminster confession of faith. 1996 (Chapter XV, 4). Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

We never see this prayer offered for Judas. Though fully culpable for his treachery and rebellion, let us all know that but, for the grace of God by the blood of Christ, Satan would daily overwhelm us with innumerable temptations for which we would have no defense. In His High Priestly prayer Jesus enlightens those who think their faith is the basis of their peace with God. Jesus prays to the Father saying:

While I was with them in the world, I kept them in Your name. Those whom You gave Me I have kept; and none of them is lost except the son of perdition, that the Scripture might be fulfilled (John 17:12).

The difference between Judas and Peter was not a matter of intellect, virtue, strength, willpower or any other human quality. The difference was the prayer of Jesus, the grace of God. Truly we are saved by faith. Peter was saved by faith – but the persevering faith of Peter was a result of God’s grace, not the cause.

We are to know that distinction, for it is the source of our comfort. Our peace with God is by the blood of Christ, our Priest who intercedes for us – prays for us. In His High Priestly prayer Jesus says, “I do not pray for the world but for those whom You have given me” (John 17:9). And Jesus, my friends, offers that prayer for you who believe.

I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word. (John 17:20)

Let us give God glory and enjoy the untold comfort of knowing that our peace with God and assurance of everlasting life is found in the power of the cross and the prayers of our Savior.

Questions for Study

1. Why do we think we might succeed where other godly people have failed (pages 2, 3)?
2. What are some distinctions between the trial of Jesus and the trial of Peter (page 4)?
3. Why do you think Peter was so horrified when he had just been so brave in the Garden of Gethsemane (pages 4, 5)?
4. Are all denials of Jesus damnable? Explain (pages 5, 6).
5. What are some of the distinctions in the failure Peter and Judas (pages 6, 7)?
6. When is sorrow good or bad (pages 6, 7)?
7. What does true repentance look like (page 7)?
8. What do you think was the biggest difference between Peter and Judas? How does that matter to you (pages 7, 8)?