

Title: How could you?  
Text: Matthew 26.69-75  
Theme: Peter's denial of Christ  
Series: Matthew #122  
Prop Stmtnt: We are one step away from denial

Read Text:

I am tempted to believe that if I had seen Jesus walk on the water, feed the 5,000, raise Lazarus from the dead and do a few more things like that, that I would never, ever, ever doubt again. Seeing God do things with my own eyes would remove all doubt and I would be straight arrow faithful. Like Adam and Eve who talked with God every day I would ...ok, so that didn't work out so great. Like Moses who met with God on Mt. Sinai I would ... ok, he messed up too. All right, like David who saw God take out Goliath I would never ...ok, yea he had a couple of issues. All right, like Solomon who saw fire come down from heaven at the dedication of the temple and Elijah who saw fire consume the altar on Mt. Carmel...oh yea, those guys had some problems too. All right, but these guys were all OT guys. But, if I saw Jesus with my own eyes and heard him with my own ears, then I think that I would never doubt again. Do you ever think that way?

But Peter saw it all, didn't he? Peter was one of the first disciples. He was part of the three who saw Jesus in his glory on the Mount of Transfiguration. Peter's mother-in-law was healed by Christ. Peter walked on water! So, how could it be that Peter would deny Christ? How could he do this? And right there, as soon as we ask the question that way, we are presuming a distance between Peter and ourselves. When you read this text, you can read it one of two ways. 1) You can read it as a tabloid. "Peter's shameful failure! What really happened in the courtyard while Jesus was being tried! Can you believe it! The rugged, tough-man fisherman made disciple denies his own leader to a servant-girl." When you read this like a tabloid, you presume to be in the crowd of accusers who feign disgust and heap scorn upon him. But, there is another way to read this. 2) You can read this as a scene from your own life. You understand. You have had plenty of times to speak up for Christ and you remained silent. You have been asked about your beliefs and you lied because you didn't want to be singled out. You know this story too well. Peter's blood is in your veins too.

If you are looking for a logical reason as to why Peter did this, there really isn't one. Sin is not logical. It is why we say, "*Sin causes brain damage.*" We like to think that we can study the failures of others and by seeing their steps into failure and the consequences of their failure that we will learn from their failure and will never do the same thing as them. How do you explain Peter? Jesus told him exactly what was going to happen, didn't he? Jesus warned him ahead of time. Peter knew to be on guard. But, just because you know about the danger does not protect you from the danger. In fact, knowing about the reality of the danger is useless if we do not realize that the danger is not out there, but is in here. I am tempted to not believe that the danger is as serious as God says. I am tempted to believe that it will not happen to me like it did to Peter and others because after all, we like to think that we are just plain smarter or little more savvy or more spiritual, right?

So, here is what I am not going to do. I am not going to put all of our attention on dissecting the anatomy of Peter's failure and then say, "don't be like Peter." No. We are like Peter. This is our story. This is our failure. This is our unbelief. This is our struggle. We need to admit this up front. Only when you expose the cockroaches of sin to the light of the gospel, will they run. But, as long as you cover them up and try to pretend that they do not exist, you give them time and space to multiply. So, I don't want to read this text and pretend that this is just Peter's problem and that I am somehow above this. Do you seriously think that you are better than Peter? Do you seriously think that you would have made a better apostle and leader of the early church than him? Did Christ miss an opportunity for a better launch to his church because he picked Peter instead of you? So, instead of reading this text from a distance where we are looking down on Peter, we need to read this text in the courtyard, sitting next to Peter.

The trial of Christ in front of the Sanhedrin is going on in the palace of the high priest, while another scene is taking place outside the palace in the courtyard. Inside were all the powerful men. Outside were the curious onlookers. Matthew makes the contrast as clear as possible. Christ is humble. Peter is proud. Christ is quiet. Peter is loud. Christ is faithful in the face of dozens of leaders and authorities. Peter is unfaithful in the presence of a little servant girl, a few servants and bystanders who are not even named. Christ is placed under oath and he speaks the truth, which will cost him his life. Peter invokes an oath and lies to save his life. But Matthew does something else. He concludes the inside scene with Christ being mocked and challenged to prophesy who was it that was hitting him while the scene outside is proving a prophesy of Christ. Peter is denying Christ, just like Christ said he would. One of the lies that we are so prone to believe is this: I can handle this on my own. Fighting sin and unfaithfulness on your own is self-defeating.

#### I. **We are all close to danger.** (69-70)

We are all close to danger because we are so prone to trust ourselves. We are in danger when we believe that these warnings are for others. We are prone not to take sin seriously and falsely believe that we can handle this on our own. But you cannot be faithful when you trust in yourself. Jesus warned Peter about what was going to happen and Peter argued with Jesus. He did not believe that he was capable of failing like that.

Think of a sin that you cannot imagine that you would ever commit. The sin that you believe that you are most incapable of committing is the sin that you ought to be most concerned about? Why is that? Your heart and will are more frail than you realize. When you do not believe that you are capable of a certain sin, then you will not lean upon God for grace. And when you do not lean upon God for grace, you are already in trouble.

Do you think that Saul would have believed you if you told him that one day he would consult a medium? Do you think that David would have believed you if you told him that he was going to steal the wife of one of his most trusted soldiers and father a child with her? Do you think Elijah would have believed you if you told him that he was going to

quit? Peter was told that he was going to deny Christ and he could not believe it and would not believe it.

So, what took Peter down? A short time earlier the guy was swinging a sword in the garden trying to lop the head of the high priest's servant. But here was a girl; a little servant girl (the word does not demand a girl, but perhaps a woman of small frame) who simply said, "You also were with Jesus the Galilean." And he blew her off. He was too big to fail right? And here he already failed. You are not too big to fail.

## II. **We are in danger when:** (68-74)

### A. **We shade our answers.**

The girl says, "*You also were with Jesus the Galilean.*" Notice this. Peter does not outright deny this, but he evades her question by saying, "*I don't know what you mean.*" The statement on the part of the servant is straightforward enough but Peter pretends that he is confused by it. We do this all the time don't we? Someone threatens to expose something in our lives and we say, "*What are you talking about?*" as if this is their problem. At that moment we choose to be a hypocrite. We choose to be a hypocrite because we choose to pretend. We pretend we don't understand, when we are trying to buy some time in order to come up with a better story. We pretend we don't understand because we want to project astonishment so as to embarrass the other person. We pretend we don't understand in order to become the accuser instead of the accused.

When are you tempted to shade your answers? When are you tempted to put a spin on things to make them appear to be different than what they really are? When are you tempted to divert attention away from yourself and make someone else appear to have the problem? It is a short step from shading our answers to lying with a straight face.

### B. **We lie with a straight face.**

Peter now gets up from where he had been sitting for a while (v.69) and goes closer to the entrance to presumably remove himself from the conversation in hopes that he will be forgotten. But, when he tries to blend in with this group the same thing happens. A servant girl says, "This man was with Jesus of Nazareth." But now, Peter is in deeper weeds right? If he agrees, then he has to confess that he has just lied. The cost just went up. But, his initial response obviously did not work, so he has to intensify it. So, instead of pretending to not understand what was said, he flat out denies it. In essence he says, "I promise you" or "I swear to you" that I do not know the man. His first denial was a functional denial as he tried to skirt the issue. This second denial was blatant.

Have you ever lied and then said to yourself or someone else, "I can't believe that I just did that."? When I do that I am saying that somehow my sin has just surprised me. I am really better than that. I am really not like that. But if I was really not like that, then who just did that? The truth is, in any given moment I am tempted to lie so that you will not

discover the truth about me. There are two reasons why I do not want you to discover the truth about me. I will come back to them in a minute.

But this denial is still not convincing to the bystanders because why else would a man who has a Galilean accent be so interested in this trial? If you have a Galilean accent, then you are from Galilee. If you are from Galilee then you knew about Jesus. That was obvious. How can you say that you do not know the man? What happened? In his effort to tell them that he didn't know Jesus, he spoke. And when he spoke, they could all tell that he had a Galilean accent. Peter couldn't even lie without leaking out the truth.

### **C. We protest too much.**

That's it for Peter. He blows a fuse. In fact he blows the entire fuse box. It is like an out of body experience. He calls upon God to curse him (damn him?) if he is lying. And once again he swears that he does not know who Jesus is. There are many occasions when we need to thank God that he did not answer some of our prayers. This is one of those times for Peter. At this moment the rooster crows and Luke tells us that Jesus turned and looked at Peter. What do you do in the morning, when you realize what you did the night before?

### **III. Genuine believers can deny in a moment; we just can't keep it up.**

Peter was devastated. There was no excuse and now no way to get this resolved. His sin crushed him and he went out and wept bitterly. Next week we will look at Judas Iscariot and will see another contrast. Judas was full of remorse. Peter was full of repentance. Initially, you cannot tell the two apart, but there is eternity between the two. Remorse is driven by embarrassment. Repentance is driven by genuine confession. Remorse only fears the consequences. Repentance hates the sin. Peter sinned. It was personal. It was deeply personal. We could understand if Peter ran away and never came back. But he didn't. One failure, one, even colossal failure does not have to define your life.

Matthew wrote this gospel sometime in the 50's or 60's A.D. Peter was a prominent leader in the church. Humanly speaking it would have been very tempting for any of the gospel writers to gloss over this event, but they each include it. In fact, it is quite likely, since Peter was apparently the only disciple there at the moment that the only reason that this story was known was because Peter made it known. Why would Peter tell this about himself? It certainly did not make him look too good, did it? Here is the leader of the disciples telling the early church what he did. He is confessing what he is capable of doing. He takes a very dark part of his life and he drags it into the light.

This would not be the last time in Peter's life that he would be tempted to deny Christ in order to save his life. But, what did Peter do? Exposing your sin to the light of the gospel helps to break the power of sin in your life. What is it about sin that is so powerful? Why do certain sins have such a hold on us and are so difficult to break? The power of sin is in what it promises. Sin is powerful because it makes a promise to you that you want to believe. When you are tempted, do not blame Satan. He is certainly not helping matters, but you empower sin to the degree that you believe the lie that is being promised to you.

When you expose a lie to the truth, the power of the lie is broken. When you drag that lie out of the darkness and into the light you expose it for what it is. You expose the falseness and the stupidity of the lie. When you expose your sin to others, you not only expose the sin to the light of the gospel, but you empower the body of Christ to help you fight that sin with the tools of the gospel.

Earlier I said that there are two reasons why I do not want you to discover the truth about me. They are a) I do not believe that God's grace is deep enough to forgive me and therefore b) I do not believe that you believe God's grace is deep enough to forgive me. I fear that you will hold it against me.

#### IV. **Jesus died for your denials.**

##### A. **Others need to know that.**

When I say that others need to know that Jesus died for their denials I mean that others need to hear that and experience a taste of that from us. Peter sinned against Christ when he denied him. Peter repented of his sin and Christ forgave him. How much did Christ forgive him? He forgave him the whole way. Peter owned his sin and Christ blew him away with grace and forgave him. Christ died for Peter's denial. There was nothing for Peter to pay. Peter had to own his sin, confess his sin but he could not pay for his sin. Christ did that. Christ forgave Peter completely. When Christ forgave Peter, there was no mark left on Peter's record which freed Peter to be able to talk about it. If Christ forgave him, he was forgiven. If Christ forgave him and you were shocked and held it against him, that is really your problem, right? Are we more offended by Peter's sin than Christ is? If Christ is the one who is most offended then when Peter repents and Christ forgives him, who are we to withhold forgiveness?

One of the knocks against the church is that we are more skilled at exposing the sins of others than we are at applying the grace of the gospel. Right? We need to own that. We need to admit that we have a lot of room for growth in this area of helping others apply the grace of the gospel to their sin. We know that sin is serious and that covering up sin is serious. But being stingy with grace is serious too and pretending that certain sins are beyond forgiveness is an affront to God who loves to be known for his mercy. We have seen harsh and hateful examples of exposing sin. We have also seen terrible examples of excusing and glossing over sin. Both are wrong. We are called to expose sin in our lives so that the gospel of Christ can be applied.

We know that sin is serious, don't we. We know that sin will destroy people. We know that by exposing sin to the light of the gospel that the power of that sin can be broken. How do we help each other break the power of sin in our lives? We do that by cultivating a community of believers where asking for prayer and confessing our weaknesses and sins is the norm. But, that will never happen unless we are serious about grace. We have to believe in our heart of hearts that God's grace is truly amazing and that his grace is greater than all of our sin. As we believe that, and live in light of that, then we cultivate an atmosphere where we have the freedom and the encouragement and the love to expose

our sin, appropriately to other brothers and sisters. When you expose your sin, it empowers the body to help you fight sin. And when brothers and sisters love God's name so much and they love you so much that they help you embrace God's grace and help you and faithfully encourage you to pursue holiness, then we are experiencing the beauty and joy and satisfaction of a gospel-driven church.

Peter was forgiven, but you know that he would have given about anything for this never to have happened in the first place. By cultivating an atmosphere of gospel grace we can help restore those who have fallen, help strengthen them for future battles and help others to avoid the danger in the first place.

#### **B. You need to know that.**

But in order to cultivate an atmosphere of gospel grace you need to believe this. You need to believe that Christ paid for your sins in full and you need to bank completely upon that, not only because this is true, but you need to help others know that this is true as well. There is power in shame and embarrassment. But that power is limited. The power of shame and embarrassment is only strong enough to control behavior in certain situations. But Jesus did not die on the cross to just modify your behavior.

There is a far greater power in the gospel. God's grace not only forgives you, but he changes your heart. Fear cannot change your heart. Shame cannot change your heart. Embarrassment and threats cannot change your heart. God's love, mercy, and grace change your heart. Do not let past failure or present struggle keep you away from the promise of the cross. Believe what Jesus believes about his death on the cross.