

Title: Only Jesus  
Text: Matthew 26.36-46  
Theme: Only Jesus could bear our wrath  
Series: Matthew #119  
Prop Stmt: Only Jesus can bear our wrath, and therefore take our trust.  
Aim: I aim to take aim at the enemies of our joy by exposing what we are tempted to trust in apart from Christ.

Have you ever been to a funeral where children are present? They know people are sad, and they are also sad to a degree but they do not have the depth of experience nor the capacity to grasp the significance of this loss. Their sadness, while real for them is not all that deep. They do not know how deep this loss really is. So too the disciples know that Christ is about to be betrayed and that this is sad. They know that he has told them that he is going to die, even be crucified but they do not yet understand all that is going on. They do not yet understand how his death is going to fulfill the Old Testament promises for a perfect Savior and a perfect sacrifice. So while they know that Christ is burdened, and they are therefore burdened, they do not know how deep this really is.

Read Text:

Judas Iscariot left the upper room where Jesus and the disciples were observing the Passover dinner. He rightly assumes that Jesus and the disciples are going to go back to the Mount of Olives where, according to Luke, they have been spending some of the nights this Passover week. His plan is to lead the chief priests and their temple guard to Jesus, where in the darkness, they can arrest Jesus without fear of incident. Jesus knows that all of this is taking place. He is about to be betrayed, deserted and denied. He walks with his disciples across the Kidron Valley and up the hill known as the Mount of Olives. Once there, he goes to a garden called Gethsemane to pray. Gethsemane means, "oil press." Gethsemane was a garden of olive trees, or what we would call a grove of trees. It was privately owned and most likely offered to Jesus and the disciples as a retreat by the owner or steward who perhaps, were followers. It was close to the city, but quiet. The grove was protected by a wall. Jesus asked eight of the disciples to stay there, presumably at the gate while he, Peter, James and John went into the actual grove. Is that an echo of Abraham who told his servants to stay with the stuff while he took Isaac with him to the place of sacrifice? Christ wants the comfort of his disciples and their engagement in prayer with him, but they fall asleep. He prays in anguish. He is repulsed by the reality of becoming sin for us and actually becoming guilty of our sin. Accepting the fact that there is no other way, he bows himself to the Father's will and surrenders to his condemnation. The contrast between the faithfulness of Christ and the disciples' failure is enormous.

I. **Only Christ is faithful.**

A. **We are not.**

Our text begins with the word "then" (v.36). Matthew is not only telling us the story in order of how it happened, but is highlighting a contrast between what just happened and

what is about to happen. Peter and the rest of the disciples just finished telling Jesus that even if they have to die, they will not deny Christ. Led by Peter, they make a promise. We will never desert you. We will never deny you. Even if we die, we will not deny. It is a good promise. It is a heart-warming promise. If this were a movie, the background music would build, the bass effects would rumble, the cameras would focus in on fists pumping the air and voices chanting in unison. It would be a moving scene and would make for good drama. Making promises makes for good drama and people like good drama. But we all know that there is a big difference between making a promise and keeping it. Peter has just said this! And the reason I think Matthew is highlighting this is because he chooses to identify James and John as the sons of Zebedee and not with their own names as he does with Peter (v.37, 40). He is doing this to draw attention to Peter. Peter made this promise of bravado and now he can't even stay awake for an hour and watch, much less pray.

i. Our flesh is weak.

John Owen said, *“Even the best saints, being left to themselves, will quickly appear to be less than men – to be nothing. All our own strength is weakness, and all our wisdom folly.”* How are you going to die for Jesus when you can't even stay awake and stay alert and stay with him when he is facing the biggest struggle of his life? We have seen this same scene repeated in our lives. We make promises with conviction and resolve and then, we forget them, or we look for a reason why we don't have to keep them. We are weak creatures.

ii. His warning was personal.

Initially Jesus tells Peter, James and John to watch with him. Watching implies being on guard. There was reason for them to be on guard. Judas and a band of soldiers were drawing near to arrest Jesus. They were in danger. They were in danger and did not know it, but Jesus did. We are so often in danger and do not realize it, but Jesus does. Jesus then prays intensely and comes back to Peter and finds him sleeping. Then Jesus asks him if he couldn't even stay awake for an hour? Then he challenges him to watch and pray. Watch and pray so that you do not enter temptation.

Every situation that you face is either a temptation or a trial. A temptation will trip you up and a trial will build you up. How you respond to that situation will determine if it is a temptation or a trial. A band of soldiers is coming to arrest Jesus. The disciples can stand with Jesus or they can run. They will be tempted to run. They will be really tempted to run. They will be so terrified for their own lives and so tempted to count their lives as being more important than faithfulness that if they do not depend on Jesus, they will run. And, of course, they did. They ran there because they did not watch and pray here. Hey! That's true for you and me too. We will not be faithful then if we are not learning and expressing dependency upon God now. Watching and praying is the means that God has ordained to strengthen us for the battle. We stand guard by recognizing that we are in a war and we cry out to God for grace to be faithful in the midst of the battle.

Now, I don't have the time to fully develop this and perhaps I will do so for our next men's breakfast on Feb.6, because I think this is really helpful. When we face temptation and give in to it, we are tempted to blame God, aren't we? We say stuff like, "*God you know how weak I am in this area, how come you put me into this? You said that you wouldn't tempt me beyond what I was able to bear and that obviously wasn't the case.*" Now, part of what we just said is true. God does know how weak we are. God does know how strong the temptation is and God knows that we cannot handle the temptation on our own. But, here is what we don't know. We don't know how awesome his grace is to empower us in the midst of the temptation. He places us in the trial that we might experience the might of his grace. God is more committed to you learning the awesome power of his grace than he is you experiencing a trouble-free life. A trouble-free life will never help you look like Jesus and it won't attract anyone else to the Savior either.

There's one more thing I need to say here. 500 years ago a movement within the "Christian church" attempted to reform it and bring it back to doctrinal and moral purity. One of the issues that was a problem in the "Christian church" was the issue of praying to "saints." Do you see why praying to saints is so wrong? Why would you ever pray to Peter? What can Peter do for you? Peter can't die for you. Peter can't forgive you. Peter cannot strengthen you. Peter cannot give you grace. Peter cannot do any of these things because Peter is a weak and broken man, just like you who is in need of the grace of God. Peter could not even stay awake and could not be counted on to keep his promise. Do not trust your salvation or forgiveness or any part of it to anyone other than Jesus. Now, praise God for Peter. Praise God that later on, Peter learned from his failure and he did watch and pray. He did depend on God. In the end, he even died for Christ. But none of that was a testimony to Peter's resolve but was a testimony to the power of God's grace. And Peter would tell you that. The same grace that humbled him and empowered him is available for you. But it does not come from Peter; it comes from God. It comes from God and was secured as a gift for us through the perfect faithfulness of Christ.

## **B. His faithfulness came at a very high price.**

### **i. His loneliness was real.**

While he does not actually "need" the disciples to stay with him and pray with him, he wants them to be with him. Jesus tells them that his soul is very sorrowful, even unto death. He was sorrowful and troubled. The weight of what he was about to face was increasing and he wanted his friends with him. Jesus knows the value and the need of good friends. He did not want to be left alone. I am convinced that one of the reasons why Jesus promises over and over to never leave us alone is because he knows the awful feeling of complete abandonment and he will never let you face what he did. Even if everyone abandons you, as they did him, he will not leave you.

### **ii. His sorrow was real.**

One of the evidences for the authenticity of the Bible (and Matthew's gospel in particular) is seen right here. Founders of a religion and heroes of a people are usually

painted in super-human poses showing unflinching resolve in the face of adversity. Jesus did not set his jaw and steel his eyes with cold determinism or with a fate-be-damned machoism. He, in the words of Isaiah, was crushed with our iniquities. His sorrow was so real that he felt as if he would die from it. He was in sorrow because he was carrying our sorrows. He was broken and stricken with grief because he was experiencing our brokenness and our grief. Think of the anguish of your soul when your sin has devastated your life and the lives around you. Think of the grief that you have borne because someone hurt you, someone hurt your child, someone stole from you, someone betrayed you, someone cheated on you. For many of you the rawness of sorrow is fresh and the wounds of grief remain open and very sensitive to the touch. We empathize with people who face multiple griefs in a short amount of time and say, "how much can a person take?" In the garden, Christ is taking it all.

iii. His repulsion was real.

But Christ faced more than the weight of our sin; he faced the actual sinfulness of our sin. Sin is toxic. Sin is offensive. To God, he responds to sin like we respond to the offensive and putrid stench of a decaying corpse. He is repulsed. His entire being gags at its rancid nature. Here in the garden, Christ is praying in deep anguish of soul. Before him is the cup of wrath. The cup is a figurative expression for the wrath of God. This was the moment for which Christ had come to the earth, but in facing this moment, he paused. Accepting the Father's wrath being poured out on him, meant that he had to accept our sin being identified with him so personally that he would feel and be treated as if he had committed every single one of our sins. The first time he prayed he asked if it was possible if there was another way. He asked that in a spirit of surrender. The second time and third time he prayed he did surrender. This was torturous for him. Our sin is real. His repulsion of it was real. By taking on himself our sin he was accepting our offensiveness, our condemnation and punishment. From that point on, every sinful thing that he was accused of, was in that sense true. He was a blasphemer. He was an adulterer. He was a thief. He was a murderer, liar, betrayer, and denier. He was it all. That meant that he had to die. It meant that he was condemned and that he would die.

iv. His submission was real.

When Christ accepted what was to come, he accepted the will of the Father with understanding. There was no other way. By the way, it is not a sin to ask God for a detour around the struggle, but if he does not provide it, know that he will provide grace to take you through it. He chose to do this. He chose to do this in obedience of his Father because it was his Father's will to rescue you. God could not rescue you, unless he chose not to rescue his son. We often say that Jesus died because he loves you. That is true. But we also ought to say that Jesus died because the Father loves you. Jesus surrendered himself to the will of his Father because it was the will of his Father not to lose anyone of those who believe on him. Jesus surrendered himself to the will of the Father because rescuing you from sin puts the heart of the Father on display and Jesus loves to make his Father's heart known. I do not know of another scene in all of Scripture that reveals the love of the Father for you, more than this one. The Father loves the Son. No Father has

ever loved his Son more than God. If anyone suffered more than Christ, it was the Father. In order for the death of Christ to fully satisfy the payment for our sin, Christ had to become sin for us and had to fully experience the guilt of our sin and fully experience the wrath of God against our sin. This was the only way that our guilt could be atoned for. The legitimacy of our salvation hinged upon the legitimacy of the offering. That night Christ drank the cup of unbridled damnation and drank it all. In the death of Christ, the Father wore out his wrath against the sin of every person who would ever believe on him. There is nothing left for us to pay. It is all gone. There is nothing left, not even a drop.

The perfect faithfulness of Christ perfectly qualified him as being sufficient for our salvation. Only Christ is a sufficient Savior. Nothing in this world is a safe place for the treasure of your happiness. Your soul is not safe anywhere except with Jesus. He was the only one qualified to take the cup. He is the only one who took the cup. The cup is empty.

## II. What this means.

### A. **For people who need to come to faith in Christ.**

Trust Christ! Trust him, right now. Acknowledge your pride, your sin, even the sin of relying on your perceived goodness. Confess it for what it is. Relying upon your perceived goodness is the rancid and revolting sin of self-righteousness. Confess it and repent of it. Turn away from it and trust in Christ. Trust in what Christ has done for you. He died as the full and final payment for your sin. Trust him.

### B. **For people who have professed faith in Christ.**

For people who have professed faith in Christ, there are two enemies that you are constantly fighting and you must fight them with this truth about the cup, the cross and the empty tomb. The first enemy is the enemy of your feelings. You are tempted to gauge your spiritual growth and identity based upon your feelings instead of on Christ. Feelings are powerful and we tend to attribute too much authority to them. My emotions can be an indicator of what I believe at the moment, but they are not a true gauge of reality and must be seen accordingly. I have to preach the truth to myself and make decisions based upon the unchanging standard of God's Word and not my shifting feelings. Feelings are God-given and are to be enjoyed and used for their God-given purpose, but they must be governed by God's truth. Sometimes I feel condemned. Sometimes I do not feel forgiven. My feelings of condemnation do not mean that I am condemned. My feelings of guilt do not mean that I am necessarily guilty or not forgiven. The basis of my standing before God is not what I feel at the moment but is based on what Christ has done for me. Your feelings will change but the cup is empty. When tempted

The second enemy is legalism. For most of you, this is your biggest enemy. You are tempted to gauge your spiritual growth and identity and the spiritual growth and identity of others based upon how well you and they are keeping the rules. (Gospel plus) In a narrow and technical sense, legalism is the idea that I have to keep certain rules or maintain certain standards in order to earn, achieve, or merit the grace and forgiveness of

God. In a broader sense, legalism is the idea that God loves me conditionally based upon my performance for that day. If you mess up, then you get put on probation until you have sufficient time to do penance and to prove to God that you are really sorry and to re-earn his favor again. What are you doing when you live like that? You are trying to drink some of the cup. You are trying to pay for your sins. You are trying to do something that sort of counts as dying on a cross too. The cup is empty! There is nothing left for you to drink. Christ died once and for all. The empty grave proves it. When you try to pay for your sins you are saying that Christ was not good enough. Like you are! This joy-stealing, love-crushing enemy of legalism has power to the degree that you do not understand and enjoy grace. But that is the problem. God's grace seems dangerous. God's grace blows the circuits in our mental fuse box. Grace (charis) is related to the word "gift". We know about gifts and giving gifts. We give gifts to people and causes that we deem worthy of our giving, right? You give gifts to your children. You give gifts to friends. You give gifts to express appreciation to people who have done nice things for you. You give gifts to causes that line up with issues that are important to you. You also give gifts that are proportionate to the relationship. That is how giving works. We assume therefore, that God gives gifts to express appreciation and are proportionate to the relationship. But, when God gives gifts to his enemies, we tend to get afraid because that seems dangerous. When God gives gifts to his enemies, then the goodness of God is now seen as being dangerous because it is so unpredictable.

The cup, the cross and the empty tomb are all related. Christ took our sin, then died our death, and was raised from the grave as a public demonstration that the debt against us was settled. Who is the "us"? The "us" is every single person who believes on Christ and not a single one of "us" is worthy of it. And God says that people are going to do that from every tribe, language and nation. Are you okay with that? You are if you understand how you were saved. Over and over God saves some of the most unlikely people and puts them into a family, called the church, and calls them brothers and sisters. Even when we were enemies of God, Christ died for us. Peter denies Christ. His sin is in that cup that Christ takes. Peter has to come to grips with the fact that Christ paid for his sin in full. But, what else is in the cup? In that cup are the sins of Gentile pagans, whom Peter is naturally opposed to because he is a Jew. But Peter's sins in that cup are just as bad as any Gentile. Do you see the point? God's gift of forgiveness and salvation is infinitely disproportionate. He gives salvation to his enemies. His goodness is humanly unpredictable and seems so dangerous. Your sins were in that cup and Christ took it all. The sins of every single person who would ever trust in Christ were in that cup and he took them all. None of us have a right to be in the family of God. We are not only by nature enemies of God, but we are enemies of one another. Apart from God's grace we would each live for our own kingdom. But, we are a church. That means that fundamentally we are a natural band of enemies who are supernaturally bound by the gospel. As a natural band of enemies, we should expect that there are more than a few kinks that we have to work on with one another. As ones supernaturally bound by the gospel, we relate to each other in hope because we know that we are not what we used to be and that none of us are yet what we will be. The gospel that saved us and is growing us is going to take us all the way home.

The gospel is the basis of our relationship to God and to each other. The basis of how well we are keeping the rules is not the foundation for our relationships. (Not Gospel plus anything) If it was, we would never truly be at rest and peace with one another because legalism can never rest because legalism is never satisfied. There is always something else to do in order to prove your worth to God.

This is why I want you to look deep into that empty cup and keep looking into it. I want you to look deep into it and sigh. I want you to breathe out. I want you to exhale in your soul because it is empty and it will forever be empty. Believe it. It is done. Be grateful. Accept it. Enjoy it. It is done because the Father loves you. God is not the ultimate rule-enforcer whose main job is to punish you when you do not measure up. Go back to the garden. Look at the Father whose heart is breaking for his Son but who loves us so much that he will pour out his wrath on his Son even while we are sinners, while we are his enemies, while we are rebels. Look at what Christ does. He drains the cup. His death empties the storehouse of God's wrath against our sin. God does not love you on the basis of your faithfulness; he loves you on the basis of his Son's perfect faithfulness. Rest in the fact that Christ emptied the cup. Rejoice in the fact that Christ emptied the cup.