

Matthew 26:33-40, 57

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[0 : 00] Let's turn again for a little to the chapter we read in Matthew's Gospel, Matthew 26. Just a few verses I want us to consider tonight.

And the first of these is in verse 33, after Jesus had told the disciples that they would fall away that night.

That Peter in verse 33 answered him, though they all fall away because of you, I will never fall away.

Jesus said to him, truly I tell you this very night before the cock crows you will deny me three times. Peter said to him, even if I must die with you, I will not deny you.

And such like then we find again at verse 40. And he came to his disciples and found them sleeping. And he said to Peter, so could you not watch with me one hour?

[1 : 04] Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. Verse 57. They see then those who had seized Jesus led him to Caiaphas, a high priest, where the scribes and the elders had gathered.

And Peter was following him at a distance. And then we go on and we see Peter denying Jesus. I just want to follow this part of Matthew's account.

It's supposed to be a very interesting question that we would ask ourselves. What would you like to be remembered for? At the end of your days, if you were able to sum up your life or if there was one particular thing or a couple of things, and you'd say, actually that's what I would like to be remembered for.

The thing is that what you would like to be remembered for and what people do or will remember you for might be completely different.

And you might be saying to yourself, I wish that's not what I was being remembered for. And I'm quite sure that if you were able to sit down with Peter and say to Peter, what would you like to be remembered for?

[2 : 21] Peter might think of many of the wonderful incidents with Jesus about, say, for instance, walking on the water. I said, I would love to be remembered as a man who walked on the water to Jesus.

I would love to be remembered as a man up on top of the mountain who saw Jesus transfigured. And I wanted to stay there. And I said, Lord, can we build three tabernacles, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah?

And while there are many, many incidents in the life of Peter that he could be remembered for, one of the things that he will always be remembered for is his denial of the Lord Jesus.

And it wasn't just a denial and a simply saying, well, I don't know. It was a denial that was a denial with real anger, a denial where he was invoking curses down upon himself.

It was a denial where he was making out that Jesus was nothing to him, that he had no knowledge of him at all. It was a vehement, complete denial.

[3 : 31] And so maybe it says more about us than anything else, but that that's why one of the things we always remember about Peter. And maybe that could be a justifiable criticism of ourselves, that we're guilty of remembering maybe the wrongdoings of people rather than the good things.

In the same way, as often if you say, what do you remember David for? A lot of people will go straight away and say, oh, David is adultery. If we think like that, maybe it's saying more about ourselves, where we're more prone to reflect upon the wrongdoings and the many, many, many virtues that were visible and characterized the life of David and also characterized the life of Peter.

Anyway, we find here that Peter is somebody who suffered. And there's no question whatever he suffered in his life because of what he did.

And I think one of the things maybe that we find hard to grasp and sometimes hard to deal with, because I'm sure everybody in here will look back at their lives, particularly older people or not so old people.

You look back over your lives and there are things that you say, I wish I could change. There's things I wish I had done differently. There are things I'm sure we're all ashamed of. And you look back and you say, I wish I could sort that out.

[4 : 58] But you know, one of the wonderful things is that in Jesus, God in Jesus Christ forgives us our sins. But sometimes we have problems in forgiving ourselves.

And that is something we need to address before God and seek for the grace to deal with these things. Because Satan, who is the accuser of the brethren, always loves to accuse us and to bring these things before us and to try and weigh us down so that we don't enjoy the freedom and the liberty that is in Jesus.

He wants us to make us feel bad about ourselves. And of course there are times, and rightly so, when we're convicted of our sin. And rightly so, we need to go to the Lord and seek for forgiveness again and confess our sin.

But we've also got to understand just what forgiveness is. Remember that the very words of forgiveness and pardon and all these things, one of the things it means is that our sin has been lifted up and carried away.

It's not that we have ceased being sinners, but our accountability before God has been wiped clean through what Jesus has done. I'm sure that Peter, as the years went on, had long since learned to forgive himself.

[6 : 18] There was a period he couldn't. In fact, immediately after his denial, he thought he had lost everything. In fact, it tells us in John's Gospel that after Jesus had been put to death, that he said to the other disciples, Well, I'm going fishing.

And the actual language used is, I'm going back to the fishing. Peter had been a fisherman. And Peter thought that his days of being an evangelist, his days of speaking and witnessing and testifying for Christ, that these days were over.

But they weren't. Jesus had told Peter that he was going to be a mighty man used for him. And of course we know of how Jesus restored Peter. But that's, by the way, tonight I want us to look at this character, Peter, and to look at how he arrived where he did.

Now as you know, Peter is such a complex character. And I think he's quite a favorite amongst people who know their Bible. Because we can identify in some ways with Peter.

He was really complex. There was a very self-seeking side. And there was a self-sacrificial side. There was an incredibly courageous side.

[7 : 42] And there was a timid side. He was the person who probably made the greatest confession regarding Jesus. And he was certainly the one who made the most cowardly denial.

Peter was the one who had great spiritual insights. And sometimes he was so slow to grasp and understand things.

And so as you look at Peter, you see this complex character. And that's one of the things we find so appealing about him. Because as we look at ourselves, and whenever we focus in, we too are fairly complex.

And we see ourselves, we see this side and we see that side. I suppose in every person there is an element of the Jekyll and Hyde. And that is very true within the Christian life.

Where we see the Christian graces hopefully developing and strengthening and growing. But we're also aware of the corruption and of the rebellion and the unsavory side that's within us.

[8 : 49] Which we hope is being dealt with more and more by God's grace. So that's I think one of the reasons why we're so drawn to this man, to Peter.

So we ask ourselves, how did Peter end up where he did? Denying the Lord in the way that he did. Well I think the first thing we see here is that Peter was overconfident in his own strength and in his own abilities.

Because Jesus, remember, he had just after instituting the Lord's Supper when they had gone out. He said to them, you will all fall away because of me this night.

For it is written, I will strike the shepherd and the sheep of the flock will be scattered. But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee. Straight away Peter's right in.

And Peter says, though they all fall away because of you. In other words, he's talking about all the other disciples. Supposing all of them fall away, I will never fall away.

[9 : 52] Peter gave himself more credit for courage that he thought he had. He thought and he meant it. When Peter said that, he meant it with all his heart.

Peter is saying to Jesus, Lord, if there's one person you can depend on, whatever's going to happen to you, I'm not altogether sure. But count on it.

I will be there with you through thick and thin. In fact, I will go to prison. I am ready to die with you. I'll be there with you to the very bitter end.

That's what Peter really is saying to Jesus. So we see that there's a self-confidence in Peter and that, of course, needs to be addressed.

And I'm sure that there are times ourselves in our own life, we also have made promises. Promises to ourselves that we're going to be this, that we're going to be that.

[10 : 56] Maybe promises to others and maybe even promises to God. And we find ourselves crashing down in the very promises we've made. Why? Because we have tried to deal with things in our own strength.

Now, I'm not trying to dismiss our own strength and dismiss our own initiative and trying to dismiss our own abilities in any way.

But one of the things, and most certainly in the Christian life, is that we have to learn that our dependence in everything is ultimately upon the Lord.

And that was something that Peter had to learn. And so we find that this really often is one of the roads to a fall.

And, you know, it's quite often after a time of blessing. The disciples just had a wonderful time. They had the institution of the Lord's Supper. And when we go to John's Gospel and read from John 13 right through to the high priestly prayer in John 17, the most marvelous teaching of Jesus.

[12 : 06] And when I read through there, I was saying, well, if there's one place I would love to have been, would have been in that upper room. It was so intimate. It was so powerful.

There was such a sense of Christ's love to his people. There was such a sense of union and fellowship and communion and bond.

And these disciples, their hearts must have been overwhelmed with a sense of what they had experienced and where they had been. And yet, so quickly after, Peter collapses.

And that is sometimes the most dangerous, vulnerable time, is after a time of great blessing. When we've been taken up. Where we've had what we might term mountaintop experiences.

And part of the reason why we are most vulnerable is it is a time that we're liable to take our eyes. It may seem strange. But we might become a little prayerless or become a little too self-confident.

[13 : 13] And somehow think that the blessing that we are receiving, we have somehow managed to be part of ourselves. And that we've had some input into it.

You may, you see, our hearts are so deceitful. And one of the things we've never discovered properly is what we term self-seeking.

It's what's wrong with everybody. It's that we want the glory rather than give God the glory. That is part of what's wrong with the human heart. God desires glory.

Full stop. He desires glory out of every person's life. Out of your life and my life. But our self-seeking is such that we want the glory ourselves.

That's where it's gone wrong. And it is so subtle, so deceitful, that often we don't recognize it. But God always does. He examines the heart.

[14 : 21] He knows exactly where we're at and what we're at. So we've always got to be careful. Wherever we're at, even after times of blessing, that we aren't looking for a little bit of glory somewhere within it ourselves.

Anyway, Peter comes crashing down because, A, he thinks or he attributes more courage to himself than he actually has.

The second area where Peter ended up falling was his inattentiveness, we could say, to being watchful and prayerful. Jesus took the disciples, all of them, and then he separated them.

And he took the three, the three, the inner three, Peter, James, and John with him. And he said to them, my soul is so sorrowful. I need to go and pray. Because Jesus was beginning to get a glimpse of the sufferings that he was to go, that he was facing at Calvary.

That he was to face at Calvary. And so he has to go. So he's in agony of soul. And he leaves the disciples, and he leaves particularly Peter, James, and John behind to watch and pray.

[15 : 32] And he comes back, and he finds them sleeping. And he goes to Peter particularly. And he says to Peter, Peter, he says, watch and pray.

That's what we find there. Because it's very interesting that if we went to Luke's account, that Matthew doesn't talk about this, but Luke does.

That when Jesus is warning Peter, right? When Jesus is warning Peter and telling him that after Peter is so confident and telling Jesus, You can rely on me, Lord.

And Jesus says to Peter, look, you're going to deny me tonight three times before the cock crows. And Peter wouldn't believe it. In Luke's account we're told, in Luke's gospel we're told, That Jesus actually warned Peter.

And he said to him, you are at the center of a satanic warfare. Satan, Simon, he said, Satan is desiring to have you. That he may shake you like wheat.

[16 : 38] But I've prayed for you that your faith won't fail. So Jesus is warning Peter. And he says, Peter, you tonight is one of the most dangerous nights of your life.

Satan, the prince of darkness, is out to get you. And that's why he said to Peter specifically, watch and pray that you enter not into temptation.

Peter, I've been warning you, Satan is going for your jugular. Watch and pray. And Peter didn't.

Every time Jesus came back, Peter was asleep. Now, whether it was a natural tiredness or whether it was a satanic tiredness, I don't know.

Jesus said the spirit indeed is willing but the flesh is weak. And I think we're all aware of how a darkness can come over us. Whenever we go to read God's word, whenever we go to pray and even when we come into church, sometimes a spirit of drowsiness.

[17 : 46] You can be as alert. You can pick up any magazine or paper and start. And then he said, oh, you know this, I'm going to read the Bible. And you go to read the Bible and you begin to get sleepy.

There was no sleep before. Or you begin to pray. And you say, I'm going to pray. And almost you can guarantee if you go to start to pray anywhere that there'll be some distraction.

But sometimes this tiredness takes over. You can come into church and you're hardly, you've hardly sat down when you begin to get really, really heavy.

Sometimes it can be a natural tiredness. But sometimes it's not. And whether this was a natural tiredness, it could have been. Or whether it was a satanic overwhelming of tiredness, I don't know.

But anyway, Peter is struggling and he's falling asleep. And so he's not heeding the warnings of Jesus and who is telling him to watch and to pray.

[18 : 51] And then we find Peter's, what we might say, his indecisiveness and his rashness coming into play. Because although it doesn't tell us in Matthew's gospel, it tells us in other gospels, when the crowd came to take Jesus, that it tells us here that one of the disciples, and behold, one of those who were with Jesus, stretched out his hand and drew his sword and struck the servant to the high priest and cut off his ear.

That was Peter. It tells us in the other gospels. Now Peter was doing what he said to Jesus he would do. And Peter thought he was preparing himself for the crisis that Jesus was talking about.

And Peter was preparing himself in the only way that he knew how. He was the kind of person who would take on the world. He would be always up for a challenge. That's the kind of person he was.

And when they came to take Jesus, Peter reacted in the way that he would always do. Pulled out the sword. That was the, he just wheeled off the ear of the servant. But he wasn't ready for what Jesus said then.

Jesus said, put away your sword. This is not the way we're dealing with this. And when Peter put away the sword, he then had absolutely no idea what to do.

[20 : 15] Because he was preparing himself in the wrong way. Jesus had said to him, prepare yourself with prayer. Prepare yourself by watching, by being on guard.

And Peter was called, caught up with himself. I'm going to be prepared. I'm going to be ready. Jesus, you can depend on me. Poor Peter, he meant well.

But his focus was all wrong. You know, this is a warning to ourselves. Peter had to learn this great lesson. That our spiritual battles are fought by and in the Lord, not with the arm of flesh.

It's not by might. It's not by power. But by my spirit, saith the Lord. And so poor Peter, his world is thrown upside down.

And he doesn't know what to do. And the only thing that happened then was, verse 56, then all the disciples left him and fled. And then those who had seized Jesus led him to Caiaphas, a high priest, where the scribes and the elders had gathered.

[21 : 21] And Peter, he obviously comes back. It tells us, verse 58, and Peter was following him at a distance. Poor Peter. Here is the Peter.

Now you think about it. Here is Peter. And he's following Jesus at a distance, way back. As it says in the A.V., far off. Do you remember a time when Jesus had preached?

There were huge crowds. They didn't like what they were hearing. And they began to go away. Jesus looked at the crowd disappearing. And he turned to his disciples and he said, Will you also go away?

Peter comes as usual to the front and he says, Lord, to whom else can we go? For you have the words of eternal life. And you could almost visualize Peter with his arm round Jesus saying that.

We know who you are. You have the words of eternal life. We're with you. This is the same Peter. And he's way, way at a distance.

[22 : 34] He's at a distance because he's been trusting in himself. He's at a distance because he hasn't been watching. He hasn't been praying. He hasn't been listening to the words of Jesus and the warnings of Jesus of what's going to happen.

And we've got to take these things to our shelves. Because the very same thing will happen to us as well. Now, there's a couple of things that we could say here.

The Christian who is following Jesus at a distance is not in a good place. Let me say, first of all, if tonight you, you shall know where you are.

Or maybe I shouldn't say you know where you are. You have an idea where you are. Are you following Jesus tonight at a distance?

In other words, you have never come ever to a public profession of Jesus. But in your heart of hearts, you love him.

[23 : 40] Deep down, you believe that he is your Lord. But you're following at a distance. Let me say, first and foremost, it's better to be following even if it's at a distance than not following at all.

To be not following at all is in a precarious place. To follow at a distance is not good. But as I say, it is better than not follow at all.

Because at least you are going in the right direction. But you have to ask yourself, if you are following Jesus at a distance, you have to ask yourself, why?

Is it because of people? Is it because you're saying, I really, I'm going to struggle. People know I come to church.

People know that I have a really strong side to the Christian faith. But it's another thing altogether. To align myself. And to, as it were, unfurl the flag and say, I'm a Christian.

[24 : 51] These are my people. Jesus is my Lord. I would ask you to rethink this. Because one of the things that the Bible demands from us, or God demands from us, is that salvation is a matter of believing in our heart, believing Jesus, and confessing with our mouth.

The Lord looks for both. The belief in the heart and the confession with the mouth. So make sure, if you're following Jesus, that you come, as it were, that you come out and make it clear.

And you know, the funny thing is that people, there are people who are trying to hide the work of grace in their life. And they're struggling to do that.

Because the Lord's people can see. Because the Lord's people can see. And some of the Lord's people are saying, when is he, when is she going to make that move and come out clearly on the Lord's side?

You know, Peter that night had an amazing opportunity to stand up for Jesus. Because on that particular night, they were looking for false witnesses.

[26 : 09] And it tells us this in verse 59. 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. It was a night when people were coming forward to say something about Jesus. What an opportunity.

I know it would have been difficult for Peter. But what an opportunity to come forward and say, hold on a moment. I've been with this man where you've never been.

Can I tell you about the Sea of Galilee? Can I tell you about the Mount of Transfiguration? Can I tell you what happened in the room when he raised Jairus' daughter from death?

Can I tell you about all these things? But Peter was silent at that moment. Maybe there's somebody here tonight. And one of the reasons that's keeping you back from confessing Christ is that you're afraid.

[27 : 09] And I can understand this fear. That you're afraid that you will bring dishonor upon him. And you're saying, look, in my heart of hearts I believe. But I'm afraid that if I make it public, if I come out on the Lord's side, then I'll fall away and I'll end up bringing dishonor and disgrace upon his cause.

I wish Peter could speak to you tonight. Because it was as Peter followed from afar. That's when he fell.

It wasn't when he was close by with Jesus. That's not when he fell. But when he was far away from Jesus. Following at a distance.

As I say, I understand your concerns. And I think many have thought that before professing faith in Jesus. What if? What if I don't keep going?

What if I let this cause down? What if? What if? What if? But the thing is that we are still to take this step and to move forward. And finally, we see here that Peter really, you could say, he ends up taking his place with the enemies of Jesus.

[28 : 29] That's what happens when you follow afar off. Now, in this world, we mingle with everybody. We're in the world. We're part of the world. And so it is. But the thing is, at the end of the day, that we find here that Jesus is, Peter, I should say, is completely in the wrong company.

He has, as it were, he's taken his place. If we put all the Gospels together, he's kind of sitting around the fire with the enemies of Jesus. And Peter, I know it would be difficult for you.

But you should, you had an opportunity to say something for Jesus when a servant girl came. And she said, hey, you're with Jesus.

Peter should have said, yeah. Yes, I am. But no, he didn't. Because Peter was following from a distance, all his confidence in Jesus had evaporated.

Because Peter had been trusting in himself. He was, and he was in the, with the enemies of Jesus. He couldn't open his mouth and he couldn't lift his head.

[29 : 46] And he ended up swearing and cursing, asking curses down upon himself. Saying, this man is nothing to me.

I don't know anything. And one of the girls even said to him, your accent betrays you. No, it doesn't. I don't know anything about him.

And see the end result of following from a distance. Peter went out and wept bitterly. Now I know it was David that wrote the words of Psalm 38 that we sung.

But see there, like in verse 4. My guilt has overwhelmed my soul. Its burden is a crushing weight. My wounds are foul and festering.

Because my foolishness is great. Peter could have written these words. Because that's who he felt. He went out broken hearted.

[30 : 43] Because of what he had done. My friends, may we seek to follow Jesus. Remember, he is the way. There is no other way.

He is the truth. People sometimes say, what is truth? Well, Jesus is the truth. He is life. People ask, say, I want to live life.

Well, Jesus will give you eternal life. Seek him. Ask him into your heart. Follow him. By grace.

Depending upon the Lord's strength. To enable you to follow him every day. Not at a distance. But close. Let's pray. Oh Lord, our God, we pray that as we consider the word tonight.

That we may hear the voice of our Lord speaking to us. Give us the strength and grace every day. To follow you with all our heart.

[31 : 46] We have to confess, Lord, of our own inabilities. Our own frailties. But Lord, teach us. Even through our stumbling. Through our falls.

Teach us, Lord, to walk a right. And help us upon the straight. To walk a straight path. Following our Lord and Savior. Bless us all tonight, we pray.

Do us good. And take us to our home safely. In Jesus' name we ask all. Amen.