

Colonial Presbyterian Church  
The Hinge of History: *The Slippery Slope of Denial*  
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Luke 22:54-62  
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(This message is deeply indebted to a sermon entitled *The Sifting of Peter* by G. Campbell Morgan, *The Westminster Pulpit*, Vol. 1, pp 190-203).

Our journey through Luke's Gospel brings us to Luke 22:54-62. Let's stand and read the Word of God together.

As we join Jesus back in the Garden of Gethsemane, remember that it is the day of the Passover celebration which began at sunset. So now it is evening, and probably quite late into the night...perhaps midnight or later. If you recall, Jesus has been betrayed by Judas. The chief priests, elders, and officers of the temple have placed Jesus under arrest, and now Luke tells us in vs. 54 that they bring Jesus to the house of the high priest.

We won't park here long, but I want you to be familiar with the players. There were apparently two active high priests during the life of Christ: Annas and Caiaphas. According to John's gospel, Annas was the father-in-law of Caiaphas, but it looks as though Caiaphas held the primary leadership position in the temple during this particular week in Jerusalem. And remember that the high priests, or the chief priests, held tremendous power within the Jewish culture...so much so that the high priests were regularly appointed by the Roman occupiers. That's important to note...the high priests played both sides of the field, and they stood to lose a great deal should Jesus lead a revolution against the Romans.

So who was Jesus taken to from the Garden of Gethsemane: Annas or Caiaphas? Luke and Mark don't tell us...they just acknowledge that Jesus was first interrogated at the house of one of the high priests. John, however, reports in John 18:13 that Jesus was first taken to the house of Annas. After a brief exchange that accomplishes nothing, Annas binds Jesus again and sends him to Caiaphas. Matthew's gospel does not include the brief stop at the home of Annas but jumps to the more important gathering that took place in house of Caiaphas. Given that Luke's gospel reports that Jesus goes from the house of the high priest to Pilate, we can probably assume that Luke has also skipped over the visit with Annas and is now describing the impromptu "trial" that takes place at the home of Caiaphas.

As is still the case in many parts of the Mediterranean world, a wealthy homeowner like Caiaphas would likely have a rock wall built around the perimeter of his home to protect his assets from thieves. So we must imagine that this large crowd of people that came to arrest Jesus

have all made their way back to the house of the high priest; but, of course, only so many people can fit into one ancient house. We get the idea that Jesus was initially left outside under the watchful eye of the temple guardsmen, while Caiaphas and the other leaders held a meeting inside the house to figure out what to do next. Meanwhile it's deep into the night, and it's freezing cold outside, so a fire is started there in the courtyard to keep the officers warm. Jesus is likely a fair distance from the fire, bound and shivering...he will not know the warmth of a fire or the comfort of close friends, for the scriptures tell us the disciples scattered in order to avoid being arrested. That is except for Peter, who was "following from a distance."

The text tells us that Peter, taking advantage of the darkness, quietly sits down among the persecutors to warm himself at their fire, when suddenly a servant girl sees his face in the light. She says, "This man was also with him." But Peter denies it, saying, "Woman, I do not know him." Luke goes on to describe how two other people, over the course of the evening, recognize Peter as a Jesus-follower and a man from Galilee; and again, on both occasions, Peter denies his association with Jesus. On the third denial, Peter hears the cock crow, and at that very moment, Jesus catches his eye from across the courtyard. Peter remembers that Jesus predicted his three-fold denial just hours before while they were in Jerusalem in the upper room. Luke reports that Peter is crushed, and he goes out into the darkness and weeps bitterly.

Now this story of Peter's denial of Christ is very famous, and very unfortunate. Once again, like Judas, we see one of the Twelve close companions of Christ utterly crumble under pressure, and we are left to wonder if we would do the same if the right set of circumstances were presented. However, we should not think that Peter's denial was simply the result of swords and torches...this denial was coming for some time.

As I was preparing for this message, I came across an old sermon by the great 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century English preacher, G. Campbell Morgan. Morgan brilliantly traces the path that led from Peter's confession of Jesus as the Christ in Caesarea Philippi to this dismal scene of denial in the high priest's courtyard. This path to denial is worth noting, because it is a path that we can very easily find ourselves on if we are not vigilant about our faith and our daily commitment to follow Jesus. In other words, this denial by Peter did not happen overnight...it was a gradual, slippery slope that finally resulted in a blasphemous denial. Let me show you.

First, let's jump into our time machine and return to Matthew 16, to Caesarea Philippi, a year or so earlier. Jesus is at one of the main intersections of trade in the ancient Middle East, and He asks His disciples the ultimate question: "Who do you say that I am?" This is the question that we must all answer, by the way...it is the question upon which all of history hinges: who is this Jesus? Is He a lunatic, is He a liar, or is Jesus Lord? Those are your only three options...His claims are too outlandish to call him a good man and a good teacher...he did not leave us that option. And listen, you cannot call yourself a thinking person and fail to answer

this question. Jesus is too important, too controversial...His influence is too universal and unprecedented to ignore Him all together. . So place yourself upon this dusty road, and consider how you would answer the question that is now being asked of the Twelve by this man Jesus... “Who do you say that I am?” Liar, lunatic, or Lord?

Peter, the most passionate and impetuous of the Twelve declares, “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God!” Now remember, Jesus did not have a last name other than the descriptor “the son of Joseph” or an association with his hometown called Nazareth. Most of us go around thinking that our Savior had a first name, “Jesus” and his last name was “Christ.” But Christ is not a name; it is a title meaning “the anointed one.” Christ is the Greek translation of the Hebrew word, “Messiah.” So Peter is proclaiming, “You are the Messiah...you are the Anointed One...you are the Son of the Living God...you are the fulfillment of the prophecies...you are the Son of Man...you are the King and the One promised by God.”

Needless to say, somewhere close by, Richard Dawson could be heard saying, “Survey says...ding...the number one answer...Jesus is the Christ!” And people started jumping up and down and somebody kissed Richard...cuz somebody always kisses Richard. Sorry...I’m a child of the 80’s...there was nothing else on TV...never mind.

This moment in Caesarea Philippi is certainly the highest point of this fisherman’s life...Peter is all in, he is enthusiastic, he is convinced, he is committed. Jesus Christ is his captain, and Peter is ready to go to battle, even to the death. Jesus responds enthusiastically to Peter’s confession in Matthew 16:17, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”

Now, I’m sure Peter was initially humbled by this prophetic blessing from Jesus. But I imagine...a few hours later when Jesus went up the mountain to pray, Peter probably did a little dance for the other Eleven apostles...he probably made up a little song...a rap song...that went something like this:

My name is Peter, and I’m the leader;  
Cuz I’m the rock, and you’re so not

I get to bind stuff and even loose stuff,  
Whatever that means, I’ll do as I please

Cuz I am Peter and I’m the leader.  
I am more blessed, than all of the rest

Don't call me Simon the Son of Jonah  
I've been promoted, those days are over

Call me Peter, cuz I'm the leader  
I'll do as I please, cuz I got the keys! Yeah baby!

I really do need to lay off the 5 hour energy drink.

So Peter is no doubt pretty proud of himself for getting the right answer and he's pretty pumped by his recent promotion. But watch what happens immediately afterwards here in Matthew 16. Matthew writes beginning in vs. 21, "From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you."

Any of you business leaders who have ever hired a young rising superstar into your organization can relate with what Jesus is dealing with right now. You give some young eager beaver a promotion and 5 minutes later he's telling you how to do your job, right? That's kind of the picture here, but it's worse than that. Jesus is revealing that his persecution, suffering, and death is the path that leads to the salvation of the world, and Peter simply declares that Jesus is wrong. Jesus says, "These things are going to happen to me" and Peter replies, "those things will NEVER happen to you." Peter literally rebukes Jesus; the student rebukes the teacher; the subject rebukes the King...bad idea. Jesus responds, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man."

Talk about awkward...this is awkward. A few verses ago Peter was declared blessed...he got a new title...he got a new name...he was given the keys to the kingdom...he wrote a cool rap song...and now, a few verses later, Jesus addresses him as "Satan." (I don't think Peter wrote a song about that title...some of the other guys may have.) The table is quickly turned, and this time Jesus rebukes Peter, and His rebuke is brutal and accurate...Peter is unknowingly serving the Tempter, and Jesus calls him out. Remember, the last temptation of Christ was to avoid the cup of suffering that the Father revealed to him as his fate. We've recently seen Jesus struggle with this temptation in the Garden of Gethsemane, but here in Matthew 16, long before Jesus arrives in Jerusalem, we can already see how sensitive Jesus is to this temptation. Satan is even now presenting this alternate path that avoids suffering, and Satan is presenting this temptation through none other than Peter, the Rock, the right hand man of Jesus.

G. Campbell Morgan writes, "Peter's mistake lay in the fact that he was not prepared to accept his Master's estimate of necessity; he was not prepared to follow his Lord simply, even when he

could not understand his Lord's method. This is the common mistake of the saints. We have all made it, and therefore, sooner or later, we have found ourselves at a distance from Jesus."

Morgan's observation is clear and convicting for all of us who are followers of Jesus: at some point, we just disagree with the Master. We become disillusioned or disenchanted with the hard, messy business of following Jesus, particularly when the road leads us into suffering and uncertainty. It is then that we begin to question the Bible...we look for some alternative translation or some alternate path. We begin to critique God, and we begin thinking that if we were God, we would do things differently...we would find a better way, a cleaner path with less sacrifice and less suffering. But listen: such thinking immediately creates distance between our souls and our Lord. Now, instead of faithful obedience to the Word of God, we begin to pick and choose those parts of the Bible...those parts of Christianity...that we think line up with our internal sense of right and wrong. We siphon out the parts we don't like, but we fully embrace the parts that we agree with. So we are not denying Christ yet...we're simply further away from Him than we once were, and we've placed ourselves in a position to critique God and God's Word.

Morgan writes, "The first step [away from Jesus] was taken when Peter shunned the cross because he did not understand it, and questioned his Lord's wisdom when He declared the method necessary to his crowning. Backsliding begins in some moment when we think we understand the genius of Christianity better than Jesus Christ does."

The next step of falling away comes in Mark 14:28-29, "And Jesus said to them, 'You will all fall away, for it is written, "I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered.'" But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee.' Peter said to him, 'Even though they all fall away, I will not.'"

Here we find that Peter indeed has become boastful. As I mentioned a few weeks ago, Peter has faith in his faith...he is quite sure that he is a man of strong character and sound judgment. He's a good person, and good people never turn their backs on their friends. Peter is offended by the prediction of Jesus that they "will all fall away." "Maybe they will JC...but not me. You think you know me...but you don't know me. I know me, and I will NEVER fall away." Not only is Peter boastful, but he employs the most irritating of all devices, comparing himself to others in order to make his arrogant point. Again...in his boastfulness, the distance between Jesus and Peter increases. Peter refuses to see himself as fragile, weak, and potentially corruptible. His faith is no longer in the truth spoken by His Master—he blatantly disagrees with what Jesus actually says; so his faith is not in the Word of God, his faith is in his own faith...his faith is in himself as a loyal friend who will remain loyal to the end.

Here once again we must examine our own hearts. How often are we in love with being in love while we totally ignore the actual person we are supposedly in love with? How many of us are quite confident in our faith and our commitment to the Christian cause, all the while ignoring the actual words of Jesus? I fear for the one who says, "I shall never fall away, even if those people do. I will never compromise the gospel. I will never cave to the pressures of society. I will never become one of those people!" Proverbs 16:18 says, "Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall." Please do not think you are an exception to that rule...you're not.

Morgan insightfully writes, "The nearer a man is to Christ, the more conscious he is of his own frailty, and the more is he possessed of strength, though he hardly know it. The nearer a man lives to Jesus Christ, the more acutely conscious is he of distance between him and his Lord by reason of his Lord's superior strength and his own frailty, and the more he presses closely to Him." Peter is no such man at this moment...his boastfulness reveals the ever increasing distance that now exists between him and the Master.

Just for contrast, remember when Jesus takes Peter fishing in the middle of the day, and Peter doesn't understand why in the world they would fish at noon? Here's how that reads in Luke 5:5, "And Simon answered, 'Master, we toiled all night and took nothing! But at your word I will let down the nets.'" Mark the contrast here...Jesus is leading, His methods make no sense to Peter, but "at His word" Peter obeys...he follows simply...he follows and obeys even when he doesn't fully understand the methods of Jesus. Watch what happens next: "And when they had done this, they enclosed a large number of fish, and their nets were breaking...but when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, 'Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord.'"

You see, that's what it looks like to be close to Jesus...we follow and obey, even when we don't fully understand His methods...and then we get a glimpse of Jesus close up and we see ourselves for who we are...sinful, frail, and unworthy...yet deeply loved and called to follow. That's where we want to be, and though Peter started his journey with Jesus in that posture, we now see that Peter is some distance away from Jesus in his heart, and his humility has turned into boasting.

Rest assured that Jesus sees Peter on this dangerous path that leads to devastating consequences, so as they enter into the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus instructs Peter, James and John to stand watch, and to pray that they not fall into temptation, while he goes a distance away to pray. A few minutes later Jesus returns and finds his three best men asleep. Look at Mark 14:37, "And he came and found them sleeping, and he said to Peter, 'Simon, are you asleep? Could you not watch one hour? Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit is indeed willing, but the flesh is weak.' And again he went away and prayed, saying the same words. And again he came and found them sleeping..."

Notice that Jesus now calls Peter, “Simon.” Remember in Luke’s gospel Jesus says, “Simon, Simon, Satan has demanded to sift you like wheat.” Peter has relapsed into his old self, Simon, and this distance that now exists between Simon-Peter and Jesus makes him a sitting duck. The sifting will be painful. Even so, Jesus prays that Peter’s faith will not fail...and we are left to believe that had not Jesus prayed for Peter, there would be no hope for his return and his restoration. Morgan writes, “Peter boastful had become Peter unwatchful. Peter confident in himself had become the man who did not feel his need for watchfulness or for prayer.”

Increased distance from Jesus is always accompanied by these two realities: a lack of watchfulness or self-awareness regarding one’s own soul; and a lack of prayer. We experience a degree of spiritual boredom, apathy, and we see no need to be watchful or to pray. In every sense of the word we are spiritually asleep, quite unaware of the precipice that looms on either side of the path upon which we tread. Your prayer life will reveal the distance that exists between you and the Savior...he who prays little is likely to be caught unaware when the Tempter comes.

As we return to the Garden and Jesus awakes Peter for the third time, the crowd comes to arrest Jesus. Now Peter is embarrassed. He has failed in his devotion to the Lord. He failed to remain watchful...he neglected prayer, so what does he do next? He pulls out his sword and slashes away, cutting off the ear of Malchus, the servant of the high priest. Morgan calls this reaction, “zeal without knowledge.” Morgan writes

The Church of God today is cursed by zeal without knowledge. This is the age of fussy feverishness, and there are multitudes of people who are attempting to overtake their lack of spiritual life by service...but you cannot make up by doing for what you lack in being. It is well for us to remember that the last act of Divine surgery which the hand of Jesus ever performed was made necessary by the blundering zeal of a distant disciple.

Did you hear Morgan’s rebuke? “We cannot make up by doing for what we lack in being.” Zeal without knowledge, doing without being, can create more damage than good. For so many years of my life, this critique well describes my journey with Christ. There was little prayer and devotion, but lots of zeal without knowledge. In my zeal, I have cut people with the sword of my good intentions...I have done a fair bit of damage that I deeply regret. I can totally relate with Peter’s condition...I think a lot of us can.

So what follows zeal without knowledge? A slackening of zeal, and a falling away from the Savior. We may still follow Jesus, but it is now from a considerable distance. This brings us to our text today. Peter follows from a distance...he is content to remain anonymous in his following...he no longer has any notion of following Jesus at the cost of imprisonment or death. Now he is content to follow Jesus as long as no one notices. And see how Peter is drawn by the attractive fire of Christ’s enemies. In this shocking picture, we find Peter seated next to the

persecutors, trying to fit in and warm himself, all the while rationalizing that it's OK to indulge in the warmth of the fire as long as no one knows that he is a Jesus follower.

Such is the condition of many of us who call ourselves Christians in our country. We no longer attend church, even though we insist that we are Christians. Now we spend our time warming our hands by the fires of our culture, sure that we can maintain our identity as Christians while at the same time enjoying the cultural buffet. But then it will happen...your speech will give you away...the influence that Christ once had upon you will betray your first love...and there at the culture's bonfire, where you are trying to live your double life...someone will say to you, "I thought you were a Christian." And what will you say? "I used to be." That would at least be honest, for you are no longer a follower of Jesus...you have denied him with your life, you may as well deny Him with your words. Or perhaps you will try to convince your worldly friend that you are yet a Christian, all the while confirming what this poor chap already believes...that these "Christians" are nothing but hypocrites who claim a "new life in Christ" yet live the old life like everybody else they know. The denial has already been accomplished long before you curse and object to the question...the distance is too great, and there is little to do but go out into the night and weep.

This slippery slope to denial is a tragic story, and it is not uncommon. Every believer is susceptible...every one of us can relate with Peter somewhere along this dangerous path to denial. However, let me make one thing perfectly clear: if there is a growing distance between you and Jesus, please remember that you have changed...not Jesus. Jesus never runs from us, Jesus never turns from us, Jesus has not rejected us...we are the ones who ran, turned, and rejected Him.

So...are you as Peter, one who has fallen upon this path of denial? Here's how you will know: if you are particularly offended by my sermon...if you are even now drafting your email to me about how I should not speak so sternly to the church...may I suggest that you may be the very soul on the precipice of denial? Perhaps you are...perhaps we all are somewhere further away from Jesus than we should like due to our rejection of the cross that we have been commanded to pick up...our cross...the death of our old lives that Jesus requires. Perhaps we, too, have been arrogant, lazy, and we have set aside prayer. Perhaps we have been indulgent with our zeal, somehow believing that we could make up by doing what we lacked in being. Or maybe we have flat out denied Jesus...we are now so far from Christ that his gaze makes us long for the darkness where we might hide and weep for the love we have lost.

Listen friends: here is the good news of the Gospel—Jesus died for betrayers, deniers, and overly zealous do-gooders alike! Not one of us is so far gone that we cannot even now turn around and find Jesus as close as a breath away. The message of the Gospel is clear and a comfort to all who have gone astray: confess your condition, repent—turn around, turn away



from that false fire—and return to your Master. 1 John 1:9 says that if we confess our sins, Christ is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

Those of us familiar with the Gospel narrative know that Jesus does, in fact, restore Peter. Ironically, the risen Lord builds His own fire for Peter, and three times Jesus asks Peter, “Do you love me?”...and three times Peter declares his love for Christ. And then Peter follows Jesus...and he does go to prison, and he does experience martyrdom...but Peter will never again succumb to the path of denial.

Listen: Jesus is not in the business of condemnation...He is in the business of redemption. But our redemption begins with an honest assessment of our condition. Where are you in this narrative? Where are you along this path? Will you repent?

Let's pray.