

What could possibly be worse than denying Jesus? It's a hard thing to imagine, isn't it? I mean, Judas' betrayal would probably qualify. The murderous actions of the chief priests and Pharisees. The complacency of Pilate. There's a few things that we would probably rank as worse. But not many.

No, when Peter denies being Jesus' disciple. When he denies knowing Jesus. When he denies even knowing who Jesus is. That's bad. That's really, really bad.

Not only is it the actions of a really terrible disciple and student and friend. But it flies in the face of Jesus' own explicit instructions to Peter. In Mark 8:34-36, Jesus says,

*“If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it. For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul?”*

And yet that is exactly what Peter has just done. He has forfeited his soul to save his own skin. He has denied his Lord so that he doesn't have to deny himself. He has watched Jesus being led to a cross, but dodged taking up one of his own.

Peter has failed. Utterly and completely failed. The disciples in general have failed. When the soldiers arrived, they all ran away. We come down hard on Peter, and rightly so, but at least he followed Jesus to the courtyard of the high priest. Most of the disciples didn't even do that. As Jesus rightly foretold, the shepherd was struck and the sheep scattered. Jesus was struck and his disciples ran. What could be worse than that?

Well, actually, there is something worse than that. It's hard to imagine, I know. But it's true. There is something worse than denying Jesus to a bunch of strangers: there's also denying Jesus to his face. And that's something that Peter was also guilty of doing.

Our Passion Reading this evening is separated into two chunks. The first takes place immediately after the Last Supper. As Jesus and his disciples are walking to the Mount of Olives, where the Garden of Gethsemane was located.

Then we skip forward, over Jesus' prayer in the Garden that we covered last week, to this incident with Peter's denial. And while we're familiar with this second portion – of Peter denying Jesus three times to the servants outside Jesus' trial – the earlier passage needs some examination.

Because it's here that we read Jesus' prophecy, *“You will all fall away.”* And we also read Peter's response, *“Even though they all fall away, I will not... If I must die with you, I will not deny you.”* Something that they all agreed with.

Do you realize what Peter has just said here? He's looked Jesus in the eye and said, “I don't believe you. You're wrong. And I'm gonna prove it.” Long before he ever shows up in that courtyard, he has already denied Jesus to his face. He has said, “You don't know me Jesus. I'm stronger than you realize. I'm better than you think. I'm not the sinner you say that I am.”

And frankly, that is a much more dangerous thing to say than just denying Jesus to a bunch of a strangers. Don't get me wrong. Denying your Lord is a bad thing. A very bad thing. Something that Jesus warned Peter about doing. It's most certainly a sin.

But telling God that he's wrong? That you're not the sinner he says that you are? Well, that's a very dangerous place to be.

That is, in fact, the same attitude that the chief priests and Pharisees took. As Peter is denying his Lord three times, Jesus is standing trial in front of a group of men who are telling him, “You're wrong. We're not the sinners you say we are.”

The human capacity for pride and arrogance is unlimited. The human desire for self-righteousness is unfathomable. And the human tendency to hear God's Word and say, “No, I don't like hearing that. I'm going to believe something different...” well, that's a sin that humanity has been committing since the time of Adam and Eve.

Denying your Lord to the world is bad. Denying your Lord to His face is worse. But they are both things that we have all been guilty of doing. And if we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.

Because I've never met a single Christian who hasn't looked back on a conversation or situation at some point in their life and thought, "Maybe I should have told them about Jesus. Maybe I should have hallowed God's name through my words and actions a little bit better. Maybe I should have let them know I was a disciple of Jesus by my love."

If you've every thought that, you are not alone. Your brothers and sisters in Christ have done it. Peter did it. The disciples did it. And I've done it.

But if we take these moments of failure, of guilt and shame, and we just make excuses for them or try to shove them aside like they didn't happen or didn't matter, well then we've just committed an even more dangerous sin. The sin of telling God he was wrong to call you what you are: a sinner, in need of his grace.

No, what John tells us in his epistle is that if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we confess them. If we admit to Jesus that he was right to say that we will all fall away at times. If we admit to Jesus that we have fallen away and scattered like sheep. If we break down and weep like Peter in our guilt. Well then he is faithful to forgive and restore us.

Just like Jesus forgave and restored Peter. Because after Jesus' resurrection, he found Peter on the shore, ate with him, and three times told him that Peter had not lost his place in the Kingdom of God. That he was still an apostle, sent to feed the sheep of God's flock.

Sheep who are so easily scattered just like Peter was. But sheep who need to hear that Jesus has not abandoned them or rejected them.

Which, honestly, is exactly what Jesus had already promised, even before Peter's denial. "*You will all fall away,*" Jesus said, "*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.*"

"I will be struck down. You will all scatter. You will all deny me. But I will still rise from the dead. And I will still go before you into Galilee."

That is Jesus' promise. That he lives and reigns for all eternity. And that he always goes before us. No matter how we are scattered. No matter how we might deny him to the world. No matter how we might deny him to his face.

Which is the promise and the hope that Peter missed entirely. Peter thought he was doing the right thing by proclaiming his own strength in the face of adversity. His own faithfulness in the face of temptation.

But he was wrong. He was wrong to deny Jesus' words. He was wrong in his assessment of his own abilities. But most of all, he was wrong because in so doing, he was overlooking his own salvation.

Jesus had just told Peter that he would rise from the dead. And all Peter could think about was his own hurt pride and his stubborn self-righteousness. And that is exactly why confessing our sins is so important.

Not because God needs to hear it before he'll forgive us, or any such nonsense. But because we need to remember that our salvation does not rest on our own works, but on the work of Jesus Christ. On his death and his resurrection. On his love and forgiveness and grace.

That is something worth weeping about. Not the tears of guilt that Peter shed. But the tears of joy over a God who has died for us, that we may live with him. Amen.