

As any parent, teacher, or person has worked with children knows, there are many ways to punish a child. You can put them in time out. You can spank them. You can take things away from them. You can yell at them until your voice is hoarse and the police show up at your door.

Or... you can say nothing at all. Growing up, that was always one of the worst punishments. To stand under my mother's gaze as she said nothing. As she just stared at me with complete disapproval. And disappointment. And frustration.

She usually didn't need to say anything. I already knew what I had done wrong. I already knew what she was thinking. And I already knew that there would eventually be another punishment coming. There would be a time out. Or a spanking. Or a privilege taken away.

But that would all be later. And it would be, in many ways, much more bearable than this uncomfortable look that she was giving me. Because at least that would mark the end of my mother's anger. This... this was only the beginning.

When we read about Peter's denial of Jesus, the text says that after Peter's third and final denial, "the Lord turned and looked at Peter." And I think it's easy to put ourselves in Peter's shoes. Because we've all been children when our parents gave us that look. And many of us have been parents or teachers giving our children that look.

And we know how it feels. That Peter went out and wept bitterly makes perfect sense to us. We probably would have done the same. Peter had sinned. He had denied his Lord.

And making this denial worse was the fact that Peter really did believe in Jesus. He had once boldly confessed that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of the living God. His heart was in the right place.

But just as Jesus had said in the Garden regarding their sleepiness in the midst of prayer: the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak. Those words applied even more so now in the courtyard of the high priest. Peter's spirit was willing, but his flesh was weak.

His spirit proclaimed boldly, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." His spirit proclaimed boldly, "Though they all fall away because of you, I will never fall away." His spirit proclaimed boldly, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life."

But his flesh ran away when the guards came. His flesh hid in the shadows as they took Jesus from Annas to Caiaphas to Herod to Pilate and back again. And faced with the threat of even a simple servant girl in the high priest's courtyard, his flesh denied Jesus three times.

Peter's spirit was willing, but his flesh was so very weak. And so we judge him for it. We put him on trial. Jesus is, at this moment, being put on trial by Caiaphas. He's being accused and judged by this man who considered himself the highest spiritual authority in the land.

And we do the same thing to Peter. These three people in the courtyard accuse Peter about his relationship with Jesus. While we sit as the high spiritual authority in our own minds and judge him for his sinfulness.

And then the rooster crows. And Jesus walks out. And looks at Peter. And Peter begins to weep. And we think, "Of course Jesus looks at him in scorn and anger and disappointment. We would too. He deserves a look of judgment."

Except... what if it isn't a look of judgment? We assume it is. We assumed it is because Peter has sinned so greatly. We assume it is because Jesus' prophecy about Peter's denial has been fulfilled. We assume it is because Peter runs off in tears.

But consider this: Does Jesus say one word of judgment to anyone after he is arrested? Does he judge the chief priests for bearing false witness against him? Does he judge the soldiers for beating him? Does he judge Pilate for ordering his crucifixion? Does he judge the crowds for their insults and demands for blood? During the entire course of the Passion narrative, does Jesus look at anyone in judgment?

No. Not one person. From the moment Jesus leaves the Garden of Gethsemane to the moment that he dies, Jesus has only one thought on his mind: forgiveness. That is the only reason he is there. To forgive and to save.

And that applies to Peter too. That look that Jesus gives to Peter is not a look of judgment or anger or disappointment. It's look of love and mercy and forgiveness.

A look that reminds Peter that Jesus had indeed predicted Peter's denial. But you know what else Jesus said when he made that prediction: *"I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned again, strengthen your brothers."*

Jesus knew that Peter's denial was coming. And his only thought was, "Father, don't let this failure crush him. Don't let it destroy his faith. Don't let him succumb to despair like Judas and hang himself. Strengthen his faith so that, after this is all over, he can strengthen others."

Which is exactly what Peter does. Peter return to the Lord. And he does use this experience to strengthen others. We read those exact words of strengthening in our Epistle lesson. What does Peter tell his readers?

He tells them to humble themselves. Peter, who knew the dangers of pride all too well. Who discovered exactly what happens when a willing spirit is met with the weakness of the flesh. Peter warns them, "Humble yourselves under the might hand of God. Don't exalt yourselves. Wait for him to exalt you."

He tells them to be sober-minded and watchful. Don't go shooting off your mouth in arrogance. Don't rashly start swinging your sword and cutting off your enemies' ear. Be careful.

For the devil is a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. He won't attack you when you feel strong. He'll attack you when you feel weak. When you've just done something horrible, like deny your Lord, and you wonder whether God can ever forgive you. And you just want to run away and weep bitter tears forever. That's when the devil will strike. That's when you will need to resist him the most.

And how do you resist him? Well, honestly, you don't. Christ does. Christ dies on the cross to forgive your sins. Christ rises from the dead to give you new life. Christ reveals to you the God of all grace. Christ calls you to his eternal glory. And Christ restores, confirms, strengthens, and establishes you.

Just as he did for Peter. Just as he did sitting with Peter by the Sea of Galilee after his resurrection. Erasing those three denials with three commands to once again feed his sheep as an apostle for the Lord.

Peter sinned. Of that there is no doubt. He was weak. He denied his Lord. But in that one final look of Jesus in the courtyard, Peter was not crushed with his guilt. No, Peter repented. And God forgave him.

More that forgave him, in fact. God did exactly as Jesus had prayed. He strengthened Peter's faith and used his repentance to strengthen his brothers. To turn many others to the Lord in repentance. Including us.

So when you look at Peter, don't look at him in judgment for the way he denied his Lord. For his sin is no greater than any sin you have committed. And I guarantee, though your spirit is willing, your flesh is far weaker than you realize.

No, instead, don't look at Peter at all. Look at Jesus. As he looks at you. Look at him and know that he does not look at you like a disappointed parent or a disapproving teacher or a judgmental God.

Even as he goes to the cross, he looks at you in forgiveness. And mercy. And love. And he prays for you. That your faith may not fail. But that you may turn from sin through repentance.

And strengthen those around you like Peter did. Strengthen them with your own story of forgiveness. That though you failed your Lord in your thoughts, words and deeds, whatever they may be, he forgave you. And that though they have failed their Lord, he forgives them too. Amen.