

## *Peter—He Said Never! • Matthew 26:31-35, 69-75*

There is no easy way to handle a really tough situation. I think back to a telephone call I received one Thanksgiving evening telling me about the death of a young woman's father. She was visiting at the home of some of her friends. Rather than tell her by telephone I drove over to their house. As I drove I wished it were a hundred miles so I could have more time. I thought about how to say it and practiced my words out loud. I decided to control my emotions and be strong for her as she got the news. I knew it would be hard. Although I did my best, my voice trembled. I wish I had done better. It's hard to handle a tough situation, but we all face them. They are an inevitable part of life.

We can learn a lot, though, from other people, and especially from Jesus. He faced a very tough situation with one of his closest disciples—actually, with all of them. And it didn't come at a very good time. (I guess there is no good time for hard things to happen!)

Jesus was nearing his crucifixion. It was only hours away. It would be the hardest and harshest experience anyone ever faced. He knew what the hours ahead would hold. He knew that one of his closest friends, Judas, would betray him. He knew that all of the disciples would abandon him. He knew he would be humiliated and suffer. And yet he had to deal with giving unpleasant news and confronting Peter—one of the three disciples in Jesus' special inner circle.

And so Jesus did what he had to do. He started with a statement of reality. He faced it head on. He said to his disciples, "This very night you will fall away on account of me."

Jesus knew in advance that his disciples didn't have what it would take to make it through the difficulties to come. They had been okay during the high successes of miracles and crowds and excitement, but what they were up against was more than they could handle. They did not have the stuff to deal with how hard it was going to be. He knew they would crumble under the

pressures and the stresses. He knew they would run away and hide.

Jesus also knew it would be because of him. "This very night you will fall away on account of me." If he were to skip the cross and take the easy way, if he would let the crowds crown him king, his disciples would be okay. It was because Jesus was doing what he had come to do that his disciples were in a situation they could not handle.

Jesus could have kept quiet. He could have decided not to tell them or just told them that everything would work out fine. But he chose to be a realist, to tell them the truth even if it hurt. He chose to warn them of what was to come.

I have to say here that I like the Bible. I like it for a lot of reasons, but one is that it tells the truth. It faces reality. It doesn't ignore pain or difficulty or suffering. It's true to life.

And I like Jesus because he's the same way. He is a straight shooter. He doesn't avoid the hard things in life. He is honest and forthright.

If Jesus were here today he would speak to us about the reality of our lives. He would tell us that life can be tough—and it will be. There are problems and suffering. Things happen to us that we hate. Often they are hurtful things that are not our doing; sometimes they are God's doing. Like the disciples, we find ourselves in situations where we fall on account of God.

It's not that Jesus wanted to hurt them or was insensitive to their limitations. Jesus was dealing with the realities of living in a broken and a sinful world. And doing what was best for the human race made a tough time even tougher for those disciples whom he dearly loved.

But Jesus added something to reality and

that was hope. After he predicted their fall in the night and day ahead he added, "... after I have risen, I will go ahead of you into Galilee." Jesus was looking beyond their fall and beyond his crucifixion to his resurrection and their restora-

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tion. Just like Jesus! He is upfront about the hard times but always points to the better times on the other side. He promises that God's perfect ending will be added to every Christian's true story.

Almost every week I talk with groups of pastors at some conference or another. I often tell them that I perceive that the typical people coming to church in America each Sunday feel like they have been beaten up over the last six days—at work, in life, even at home. They have not come to church to get another beating from the pulpit. They have come to find hope. It is hope that gets us through the tough times—hope that things will be better on the other side.

Jesus always offers hope. He does not avoid or deny the realities of life but acknowledges them head on and then promises hope to get us through to his better conclusion.

I have learned many lessons from the church in China. It has gone through such great suffering. Chinese Christians say that suffering is an inevitable and essential part of the Christian life, but that God always has a period of goodness and grace on the other side of every problem.

Listen well! We all have problems and we all suffer sooner or later. Some people get angry. Some people go into denial. Some people feel hopelessness and get depressed. But Jesus faces the tough situations—suffering and all—and gives hope for the other side. Even death, our greatest enemy, is not denied. Jesus is fully realistic. Then he promises resurrection and eternal life on the other side.

And through it all Jesus never lets up on love. He didn't love Peter less because he knew he would fail. In fact, he loved Peter enough to tell him the truth and to love him no matter what he did.

Jesus is amazing! He knew Peter at his worst and he loved him just the same. And Jesus loves me. Even though he knows me better than anyone. Even though he knows my worst sins that I try to keep secret. Even though he can read the thoughts of my mind. He loves me!

Personally, I think I am kind of lovable when I'm at my best. I think I can be a pretty nice guy. But, anyone who loves me at my worst must really, really love me.

Jesus loved Peter at his worst. The same way

he loves me. The same way he loves you!

Yes, there's a lot we can learn from Jesus. And there's also a lot we can learn from Peter. Peter's commitment to Jesus was high. Even though Jesus' words were initially spoken to the group, Peter took it personally and piped up with a declaration of allegiance in Matthew 26:33: "Even if all fall away on account of you, I never will."

I like this guy. Everyone knew where he stood. He loved Jesus. He gave his life to Jesus. He wasn't afraid to say so. He had a high enough commitment to speak to Jesus words of allegiance even when everyone else was silent. I like that.

Most people read Peter's story and criticize him. I read his story and identify with it because I love Jesus and because I'm not ashamed of him. But like Peter I'm prone sometimes to say and do things that are inconsistent with my commitment. I like Peter because I so easily identify with him.

I identify with his commitment, but I'm not sure I identify with his confidence. I think he had too much confidence. He wanted so much to be loyal to Jesus that he couldn't see his own weaknesses. He underestimated the horrors that lay ahead. He overestimated his own abilities.

So Jesus became more blunt. This time, not talking to the group but looking Peter in the eye, Jesus said, "I tell you the truth, this very night, before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times." Before dawn Peter would do three times what he said he would never do.

Peter's overconfidence soared out of control. "Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you." He was so sure of himself and so emphatic that he inspired the other disciples to join with him in making the same self-confident declaration.

Hadn't Peter heard? Didn't he get Jesus' message? What could Jesus have said that would have made his point clearer?

Peter was so wrapped up in the way he wanted to be that he couldn't hear what Jesus had to say. He was in psychological denial. What Jesus had said was just too painful for him to hear so he filtered it out. He contradicted the very Jesus whom he had promised to believe. He insisted that Jesus was wrong and Peter was right.

Peter's psychological denial on the inside was soon contradicted by his verbal denials on the outside. It turned out to be an awful night. They walked to the Garden of Gethsemane where Jesus separated himself from the rest of them and went and prayed one of the strangest prayers in the entire Bible. Jesus pleaded with God the Father to cancel the crucifixion. Three times he pled . . . and three times the Father said "No."

The weight of human sin coming down on Jesus almost killed him in the Garden. At the same time, Peter and the others fell asleep—just when Jesus needed them the most. Then Judas betrayed Jesus. The soldiers came, there was an ugly confrontation and Peter wounded one of the soldiers with his knife. Jesus was arrested and was carried off for a hasty and illegal trial.

Peter, still courageous, followed at a distance. He has been criticized for his caution, but at least he followed Jesus while most of the rest of the disciples went and hid, trying to protect themselves and guarantee their own safety. I call him courageous.

The pressure built up. Jesus was in trouble. The situation was getting worse than anyone had anticipated. The onlookers were anti-Jesus and increasingly belligerent. Peter was scared.

A servant girl recognized Peter and spoke to him: "You also were with Jesus of Galilee." Peter panicked. Committed, courageous Peter—intimidated by a servant girl! "I don't know what you're talking about." That was a lie. He denied Jesus. He was under pressure and it was all he could think to say. He hoped to get off the hook.

But it happened again, only this time it was worse. Another servant girl saw him and announced to everybody: "This fellow was with Jesus of Nazareth."

This time Peter swore. Somehow we all think we become more believable when we add a little profanity, especially men; it's supposed to seem macho. Peter swore and shouted, "I don't know the man!"

With his words he made matters worse. Af-

ter all, if he didn't know him why would he get so worked up about it? Besides, his accent betrayed him. He was a Galilean and Galileans had an accent that no one could miss. They spoke with a "burr" or whirring sound. Most other people around Israel didn't like it. In fact, Galileans were forbidden to give the benediction at the synagogue services because they didn't sound right!

They knew he was a Galilean and so there was a third encounter. Several people confronted Peter and said, "Surely you are one of them, for your accent gives you away." And with that Peter blew up. He swore and cursed and insisted, "I don't know the man!"

As he said it, the rooster crowed. In Luke's telling of the story he adds that when Peter heard the rooster, Jesus looked right at him. I think it was a look of love, but it still must have crushed Peter as their eyes met. Here Jesus was doing it all for Peter—suffering, humiliation, crucifixion.

Peter was one of Jesus' best friends, yet he denied ever meeting Jesus.

The rooster crowed. Peter remembered. Jesus was right. It must have been one of the most painful moments in Peter's life. The story ends with these words, "And he went outside and wept bitterly." That is the last mention of Peter in the Gospel of Matthew. His name never appears again.

All of this raises an important question: "Can someone really be a Christian and still miserably fail Jesus Christ?" The answer is "Yes". That is Peter's story and my story and perhaps your story. The proof of the genuineness of Peter's relationship to Jesus was his sorrow. For had he not cried, I would have to conclude that he did not care.

It is not the number of tears shed but the genuine sorrow over sin that marks a true disciple of Jesus Christ. We Christians do sin, but we hate what we have done. Our sins draw our tears. Our sorrow over our sin and our hatred of what we

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“Wept bitterly” may be Matthew’s final words in the chapter but that’s not the end of the story. In the last chapter of his gospel John picks up the story. Jesus was crucified that very same Friday. Peter never had a chance to say good-bye. I wonder what it was like for Peter for the next three days. His pain must have been terrible.

But then came Sunday. Jesus broke the bonds of death and rose to life again. Three women were the first to visit the empty tomb that morning. When they arrived they were frightened to find an angel who said:

Don’t be alarmed. You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter, “He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.” (Mark 16:6-7)

Jesus had not forgotten him. Jesus held no grudges against him. Jesus still loved Peter as much as ever.

The conversation between Jesus and Peter when they were reunited in Galilee is recorded in the last chapter of John’s gospel. Jesus asked Peter a question, but he asked it of him three times. He said, “Peter, do you love me?” “Do you love me?” “Do you love me?”

And Peter, sobered by reality and failure and uplifted with hope, answered three times, “Lord, I love you.” “I love you.” “I love you.”

I have no fancy finishing story for it seems to me that Peter’s story is pointed and powerful enough all by itself. But I remind you that Jesus still confronts us in reality. Jesus still gives us hope for tomorrow. Jesus is still the one who loves us no matter what.

He who so dearly loves us asks us to be faithful to him even in the toughest of times. He looks to see if we are sorry for our sins. He forgives us and restores us, but he still asks that penetrating question, “Do you love me? Do you love me? Do you love me?”

And we answer, “Yes, Lord, I love you! I love you! I love you!”

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