

“Peter’s Betrayal”

John 18:12-27

June 10, 2001

Rev. Dr. Robert S. Rayburn

Text Comment

- v.13 The primary instigators are the religious officials as is proved by the fact that they took Jesus to Annas. The soldiers, their job done, no doubt returned to their barracks. Annas had been the high priest from AD 6-15 before being deposed by Pontius Pilate’s predecessor. Many Jews resented that Roman interference in Jewish religious matters – in the law of Moses the appointment of the high priest was for life – and, what is more, after he was deposed by the Romans, no fewer than five of Annas’ sons and also his son-in-law, Caiaphas, held the office at one time or the other. So Annas was the patriarch of the high-priestly family and, no doubt in many minds, the legitimate high priest. In all likelihood, then, the reference to the high priest in v. 19 is a reference to Annas.
- v.14 That “prophecy” has been already recorded in 11:49-52, a record full of irony as Caiaphas, of course, did not mean his words in the sense in which Christians will take them.
- v.16 It has long been supposed that this “other disciple” was John himself, characteristically unidentified by name. What is interesting is the information that he was known to the high priest, and known well enough not only to gain access to the courtyard of the high priest by presenting himself to a servant girl, but to bring Peter in with him. The reason for the acquaintance is debated. Some suggest that the contact was through John’s business in fish. Others, closely examining the data given in the gospels and building on an early Christian tradition, hold that John came from a priestly family, indeed was some relative of Zechariah and Elizabeth, the parents of John the Baptist, and that the knowledge of the high priest would have come from a family association or from John’s actual service as a priest. No one can say for sure.
- v.18 The detail of the fire suggests an eye-witness recollection.
- v.20 Of course, he spoke to his disciples privately, as all the Gospels show him doing. But, what he said to them was consistent with what he said to the crowds. There was no hidden agenda.
- v.21 In other words, the Lord is saying that he is not a secret conspirator. His ministry was not conducted in a corner, but in the street, the synagogue and the temple. Anyone could easily assess his teaching and anyone could prove that he was no political revolutionary.
- v.24 If Jesus is finally to be arraigned before Pilate, the legal accusation against him will have to be brought by the reigning high priest, Caiaphas.

- v.26 The fact that the lineage of the third questioner was known to John is further confirmation that John was the other disciple present. He knew the members of the high priest's household and their relations to one another.

We have said many times before that the text of Holy Scripture is "thick." By that I mean that almost any text in the Bible has layers of meaning and of application. The texts of the Gospels are particularly *thick* in this way and certainly the text before us this morning is. I could preach many different sermons on many different themes from this text and every one would be a faithful account of its teaching, its meaning, and its application to life.

1. I could, for example, treat it as a lesson in the anatomy of a temptation. Every Christian who wishes to go up high and down deep in the things of God must learn how temptations operate, how they goad us into sin, and, therefore, how we must resist them. And, in the Bible, much of that teaching comes in the form of actual accounts of temptation and men either succumbing to temptation, as here, or resisting it, as, for example, Joseph in Potiphar's house or, in the Lord's case, his temptation in the wilderness at the beginning of his ministry or in Gethsemane at the end. No Christian who wants to live a holy life can ignore the lessons of David's fall, or Hezekiah's, or Peter's.

Take, note, here, for example, of the extraordinarily important detail in the difference in the way the temptation is put the first two times and then the third. In v. 17 the servant girl asks Peter, "You're not one of this man's disciples are you?" In v. 25 the question is put to him in the same way: "You're not one of his disciples, are you?" The way in which the question is put indicates that the expected answer is "No." The question itself suggests to Peter an easy way of escape and, no doubt gratefully, Peter took it, making his "I'm not" sound as casual and uninterested as he could. Almost certainly, coming out of the blue as the question did, and from a servant girl, a minor and unimportant figure in that courtyard, Peter never thought of the possible consequences of this first untruth. "A lie" someone has said, "is an abomination in the sight of God and a very present help in trouble." And though Peter may have winced inside when he lied about his relationship with the Lord, he thought now he was in the clear.

Then came the next question sometime later. Again it was framed in a way that made it easy to maintain his first lie. And, having given the answer once before, Peter could hardly change his story now. And, then the question came the third and last time, and now all the subtlety in the Devil's approach is abandoned. The question comes directly from a person who was in the olive grove just a short while before when Peter, at the front of the disciples, had whacked off Malchus' ear. And now there is no easy way suggested for him to take; a positive answer is expected: "Didn't I see you with him in the olive grove?" And Peter was caught by his previous lies and had to stand up and lie and lie like the coward he had become. *And then the cock crowed.*

As the perceptive William Temple, former Archbishop of Canterbury, observed, "To accept the suggestion of this first question is scarcely more than a refusal to look for trouble. The suggestion is that he is not likely to be a disciple, and no one will suppose he is unless he says so; he had little more to do than to let well [enough] alone. But that little more is fatal.

If the third question had come first, perhaps he could have met it with truth and loyalty. Peter was not one to be browbeaten into apostasy! But he was one to fear laughter, and to take a way of avoiding it when it was offered him.” [Readings, 347]

As C.S. Lewis cleverly stated the lesson, “Like a good chess player [Satan] is always trying to manoeuvre you into a position where you can save your castle only by losing your bishop.” [The Weight of Glory, 31-32] Once the little lie had been told at first, Peter was drawn into a web of deceit from which he could not escape. And in that process we find a great explanation of our own spiritual and moral weakness. We are always, always giving in at the outset to the first, seemingly minor enticements of a temptation and are thereby drawn steadily and inexorably so far under the power of a temptation that then we cannot escape its grasp and we end up doing things and saying things and thinking things we would have, just a short while before, denied that we would ever say or think or do. So often we find ourselves behaving in utterly indefensible ways and sometimes we find ourselves shaking our head, wondering how we ever came to do or say such a thing. And, if we think back, we realize that we got where we never should have been by taking some small steps that we never imagined would lead us where they did.

Those walking out into the surf at our Pacific Ocean beaches, remember, unbeknownst to them, took just one step too many and found themselves helplessly in the grip of the powerful undertow. Well, so with temptation. Which is why the masters of the Christian life will all tell you the same thing. Don’t take those first steps! Temptation is best beaten at its first approach and the key to beating it is precisely that spiritual watchfulness that recognizes temptation for what it is at the outset. It was a servant girl for goodness sake. Her opinion mattered not at all. She couldn’t do anything to Peter. All he had to do was tell her, “Yes, I have been his follower. I’ve been his follower for three years. John the Baptist pointed me to him. And he is the greatest man who has ever lived.” That would have been that. But the lie seemed so easy, so convenient, so simple a solution to all potential problems. She virtually encouraged him to lie. And so he did and a few minutes later he had openly betrayed the Lord in a way that he had a few hours before solemnly promised he would never do and must have wept to remember doing virtually every day of his life.

You young people, learn this lesson and learn it well. As John Owen memorably puts it in his great work on resisting temptation: “Venture all on the first attempt.” You can handle any temptation if you throw everything against it when it first appears, before it has sunk its teeth in you, when you still have your spiritual wits about you. But, to think to do that, to want to do that, you must walk with the Lord and stay near to him every day. It is your nearness to Christ that makes you care to put your temptations down – whatever they are: sex, money, food, fame, anger, drink, laziness, self-absorption, worldliness, pride – I say, the quality of your walk with the Lord day by day will determine whether you see your temptations coming and whether you are determined to beat them back when you actually can! “Venture all on the first attempt.” Peter didn’t and see what he did.

2. That is one layer of this text. But there are others. There is also, of course, the undeniable evidence of a most important fact that every Christian must come to proper terms with in his

or her life. I'm speaking of the Christian's continuing sinfulness and the power that sin still wields in a believer's heart.

Last Lord's Day morning, before the account of the Lord's arrest in the olive grove, we stood amazed at the moral and spiritual stubbornness, the intransigence of Judas, of the religious officials, the churchmen, of the soldiers – all of whom were given in that olive grove a grand demonstration of the majesty of Jesus Christ – who continued with their arrest in defiance of what they had witnessed with their own eyes. But here is one of his loyal disciples, one of the most passionate enthusiasts for Jesus Christ that there was in the world, doing precisely the same thing, acting as if all that he had seen and heard, all that he had witnessed counted for nothing acting as if Christ had not restored Malchus' ear right before his eyes just a few minutes before this! Here is a devoted believer acting just like an unbeliever. Here is Peter indistinguishable from Judas!

Peter loved the Lord. He really did. He was a man of some natural bravery. He really was. He was the one man in that olive grove just a short time before who – however foolishly – took up arms on the Lord's behalf and took them up against impossible odds. It was Peter who with real understanding first confessed the Lord: "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God." When many other disciples were deserting the Lord and the Lord asked the twelve if they would leave him too, it was Peter who had said, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life." It was Peter whose passion for Jesus Christ was so great that he among all the disciples had avowed his undying loyalty to the Lord earlier that same night when they were together in the Upper Room. But here, in this moment, drawn so craftily by the Devil into his web of deceit, Peter behaved as an out-and-out coward. He was unmanned by the simple question of a servant girl. He becomes pitiful, odious and despicable in our view; contemptible for his cowardice at this moment when his Lord and Savior was undergoing a supreme test.

And how many times has the same thing happened to every Christian? How many times have we found ourselves acting in ways that are the betrayal of everything we believe, ways that are nothing short of contemptible for people who know what we know and who have been shown such infinite mercy as we have been shown? How many times have we been unmanned in ways we blush to think about and never speak about? And not once only, or twice, but again and again. We are reminded, after all, that this will not be the last time that Peter's loyalty to the Lord disintegrates under peer pressure. Once in Antioch, years later, Paul had to rebuke the great apostle to his face for what was nothing but the old yellow streak appearing once again.

Oh, no, one has no true concept of the Christian life, if he or she does not understand, really understand, that alongside the peace and the joy, the love and the hope, there is, there must be a deep, abiding disappointment in oneself, disgust with oneself, shame carried heavily in the heart. "Oh wretched men and women that we are! Who will deliver us from this body of death?" It is this chronic failure to live as we should, to please the Lord as we want to, that is what chiefly keeps a Christian longing for heaven and the deliverance from sin that will finally, permanently be ours in the world to come! The other Gospel writers tell us that after

the rooster crowed, Peter went out and wept bitterly. That too is the Christian life and no life can be a Christian life that does not know that same bitterness of shame and self-hatred.

3. That view of our lives in this world is certainly painted in bold strokes here in the courtyard of the high priest. But that is hardly all. We could use these same verses as a demonstration of the sovereignty of the Lord Christ even here, at the nadir of his life. That is the truth that leaps to mind as the last words of v. 27 fall like a hammer blow: “at that moment a rooster began to crow.”

Where does that notice come from? Well, of course, it is the poignant reminder that the Lord Jesus had predicted that Peter would deny him and not only that, but that he would deny him three times before the rooster crowed. John records the Lord’s statement to that effect in 13:38. In other words, despicable as Peter’s behavior was, unconscionable as was his lie, his disowning of the Lord who had loved him and was at that very moment giving his life for him, as shameful and inexcusable and unmanly and selfish and effeminate and craven and soft as Peter was in that courtyard, *he did precisely what the Lord said he would do*. The Lord Jesus knew what was going on, knew what would happen and why. He knew it and was in control of it. History unfolded, even in the matter of the betrayals of Judas and Peter, precisely as the heaven had appointed and the Lord had predicted.

Nothing in this world escapes the control of God Almighty, even those sins for which we are entirely responsible and which cover us with shame. And the Bible is adamant in insisting on that point precisely so that we never indulge the foolish illusion that, at least in some things, God is not on his throne, the utterly foolish illusion that there are things in this world that are not under his immediate control and that do not serve his ultimate purposes in the world. This text that we have before us this morning is, in and of itself, the refutation of this “openness of God” nonsense that is now circulating around the evangelical world. There are today so-called evangelical Christians who doubt that God knows the future or that he has direct control over the affairs of individual men and the world. This is supposed to be a viewpoint that preserves God’s justice and goodness. But, in fact, it destroys his sovereignty and preserves nothing. It is idolatry pure and simple, a casting of God in our own image. It is ridiculous and blasphemous at one and the same time. And Peter knew in a moment, once the cock crowed, that it wasn’t true. God knew the future, it was unfolding according to plan. Even his disgusting cowardice did not escape the divine rule. That didn’t excuse Peter; in some ways it makes his sin worse. But, it is sin upon sin to think that to preserve our liberties we must deny God the honor of his Majesty as the King of Kings. No, here Peter learns and we learn that in every situation of our lives, no matter what, we are in God’s hands!

4. But we are still far from done with all that may be gleaned from this text we have read, this account of the beginning of Jesus’ trial and Peter’s betrayal. There are more themes here. Several more. We haven’t time for them all. But we haven’t yet mentioned the most important one, the one that John seems most interested in as he writes his Gospel. *I am speaking of the contrast that John is very intentionally drawing between the Lord under temptation and one of his disciples under temptation.*

This seems to be the reason why the text is structured as it is, with Peter's situation and the Lord's situation interwoven as they are. We have Jesus taken to Annas as the paragraph begins in v. 12; we then switch to Peter in the courtyard in vv. 15-18, back to the Lord before Annas in vv. 19-24, and then complete the account of Peter's denials in vv. 25-27. Instead of telling each story separately, John has made a point of telling them at the same time. As one commentator describes the effect of this technique, "John has constructed a dramatic contrast wherein Jesus stands up to his questioners and denies nothing, while Peter cowers before his questioners and denies everything." [R. Brown, *John (Anchor Bible)*, vol. 2, 842] Jesus is tempted with real danger, the prospect of real torture and real death but remains steadfast, honest, and pure. Peter is faced with nothing more than the mockery of servants, people below him in the class structure of that day, and he surrenders everything: his integrity, his honesty, his loyalty to Christ, everything! One man faces his temptations bravely and the other succumbs to cowardice.

And, remember, Peter is a disciple, a man of faith. But still he falls, even while Jesus remains faithful to the bitter end of his temptation. He suffered the same temptations we suffer and much worse, for unlike us, he never succumbed. You know how the power of temptation mounts the longer you resist it and how often you finally capitulate after resisting for a time. But the Lord Jesus resisted everyone of his temptations to the bitter end, never once succumbing.

This is his righteousness, the righteousness that becomes *our* righteousness when we believe in him. He came into the world sinless, but to remain sinless he had to beat back thousands upon thousands of temptations: temptations that came upon him suddenly, out of the blue, and temptations that hit him with full force at his most vulnerable moments. You know how easily you fall prey to certain temptations when you are tired or lonely or frustrated or have a sense of being treated unjustly. Well the Lord was tired all the time, so great were the demands laid upon him. He was alone in the truest and deepest sense. As a man his frustrations were worse than any you or I have ever imagined – doing all that could conceivably be done for men and women and having them utterly and inexcusably miss the point of everything he did. And how unjustly he was accused of crimes of which no man had ever in all human history been so entirely innocent. And yet, he did not sin. Even when the Devil went after him after forty days of fasting in the wilderness, even in Gethsemane when the prospect of the whole terrible ordeal of Good Friday descended upon him, he did not sin.

And, what is more, he did not sin – not because he was God, for he resisted those temptations as a man and as only a man – he did not sin because he resisted all of his temptations to the bitter end, using no resources other than those that are available to us: the Word of God, prayer, dependence upon his Father in heaven, and obedience to the commandments of God. This is the life you and I should have lived but didn't. He lived it for us in our place. He didn't need to become a man, to come into this world to suffer, to live a perfect life in the teeth of every kind of temptation – to have his life drained out of him by the effort this required. He was already perfect and complete as the Son of God. He did all this for one reason and one reason only. If we were to stand in the judgment of God we needed a perfect righteousness and only he was capable of providing it for us. He lived his life for one purpose, to give it to us as if we had lived it ourselves. And ever since this has been the sole

question facing mankind. Do you want to stand before God with your own life or with Christ's? Do you want to answer for your life or his?

To live a righteous life, one must surmount temptations of every kind. The Lord Jesus did and the greatness of that achievement, the unbelievable wonder and majesty of that holiness of life, is made all the more striking to us, it is presented to us in the sharpest focus, by being contrasted with what even a real, a genuine Christian can do with much less powerful temptations.

Do you know the old story of the bishop and the barber? It seems that the bishop came to this barbershop one day to have his hair cut and while the barber was cutting his hair the bishop asked him, as a Christian minister will, whether he went to church. "Well, no," the barber said, "I'm not a church going man myself. But, I do my best, and I'm sure the Lord will be willing to accept my best." After the haircut, the bishop got up from the chair and said to the barber, "I see you need a haircut yourself." "Well, yes," said the barber, "I suppose it is time." "Well," said the bishop, "sit right down here, I'll cut it myself." "But you're not a barber. You don't know how to cut hair." "Well," said the bishop, "I'll do my best, you will be satisfied with my best, won't you?" "Ah," said the bishop, "you won't even have your hair cut by someone doing his best. But you think God will take your entire life because you have done your best."

What you see here is Peter doing his best. His best was ugly. Everyone's best is ugly, pathetic, shameful. But here is Jesus Christ doing his best, under still worse conditions by far. It is purity, honesty, goodness to the highest degree. Whose best do you want God to judge on the great day? Yours or Christ's?

This is the entire message of the Gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ. His life can be counted as your life, you can be judged according to how he lived instead of how you lived. You can be as righteous as Jesus was righteous for you, or you can take your stand before God with your own works and nothing but your own works to show for yourself. Peter was a pathetic failure, but, remember, he was a great Christian, probably considerably greater than you or I! Look at Peter and look at Jesus Christ and make your choice. See yourself standing in the day of judgment and make your choice.

Because the sinless Savior died,
 My sinful soul is counted free;
 For God, the Just, is satisfied
 To look on Him and pardon me.