

Jesus: Denied and Abandoned

Matthew 26:31-35, 69-75

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Ames, Iowa

March 2, 2025

Have you ever blown it? I mean, really blown it? I don't mean you have taken a wrong turn on a road and gone the wrong way on a one-way street. I mean, have you ever really made a massive sinful mistake in your life? I guess any sin is huge and horrible, but the fact is, some sins have greater consequences than others.

Now, if you are thinking, "*Well, I have sinned. I have even committed some bad sins, but not that bad. I am not as bad as others who have sinned.*" If you are thinking this, congratulations, you're in the same category as the Pharisee in Luke 18 who said, "*Lord, thank you that I am not as bad as that tax collector.*" This is not a good place to be.

Sometimes, I look back on my life and wonder how God could ever accept me or love me because of some of the things I have done. Do you ever feel that way? To make matters worse, the older I get, the more I understand God's holiness and the horror of my sin. Sometimes, I just sit in speechless silence and feel overwhelmed in gratitude of God's grace. Friends, I don't know about you, but I am grateful that the gospel is for losers, like me.

I hope you are too because we have all blown it. I don't just mean we have made mistakes; I mean we have sinned against God, and we need to be rescued. We need a Hero like Jesus to save us, renew us, and restore us.

We will work through these seven verses, but before we do, I need to set up the text we will study because the full impact of this passage includes the context.

Matthew records Peter's denial of Jesus on the heels of Jesus' trial for a reason. He intends us to think about Jesus' trial and Peter's failure side-by-side. Matthew sets up a dramatic contrast between Peter and Jesus.

Let's consider the contrast. Jesus was falsely accused of insurrection and blasphemy. Yet, Peter was rightly accused of being Jesus' disciple. Then, Jesus was questioned by the high priest, Caiaphas. Peter was questioned by the priests' servant girls. Then, both men take oaths and swear to tell the truth. Jesus stands before His accusers and denies nothing. Peter, on the other hand, cowers before his questioners and denies everything. Sadly, he even denies knowing Jesus. In the end, Jesus stood firm, and even when everyone had abandoned Him, He offered His life as a ransom for sinners and that included Peter.¹ Even though Peter disowned Jesus, Jesus didn't disown Peter. This is very good news for everyone who has blown it in life, and as a Christian.

The bottom line is this: The comparison and contrast of these two stories gives powerful evidence that no one except Jesus could do the work of the Lord's Suffering Servant. Only Jesus could be faithful to the Lord under the severest of circumstances. Then by His sinless endurance, He won the victory for all who trust in Him as their Lord and Savior.²

Last Sunday, I closed the sermon by recounting Peter's drift. Before we get into Peter's denial in vv. 69-75, I want to review Peter's drift from Jesus in the larger context of Matthew 26. It really is incredible to watch his slide occur in just one chapter.

First, Peter boasted to Jesus on the way to the Garden of Gethsemane that he would never abandon Jesus. Jesus told him in v. 34:

¹ Daniel Doriani, *Reformed Expository Commentary: Matthew, Vol. 2*, 467.

² Herman Ridderbos in James Boice commentary, *The Gospel of Matthew, Vol. 2, The Triumph of the King, Matthew 18-28*, 590.

“Truly, I tell you, this very night, before the rooster crows, you will deny me three times.”

Peter, in his pride, rejected Jesus’ words. Then, he and all the disciples doubled down and said, if necessary, they would die with Jesus.

When they reached the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus asked His disciples to pray. He took Peter, James, and John to pray with Him. Yet, Peter failed to pray.

While Peter was sleeping, Judas arrived with the mob to arrest Jesus. Peter woke up and attempted to defend Jesus. He tried to kill the high priest’s servant, but only cut off his ear. He failed at that too.

After Jesus was arrested, Peter began to drift further. He no longer followed Jesus closely, but instead followed at a distance. As they reached the high priest’s house, Peter slipped into the courtyard where he sat with Jesus’ enemies. At this point, Peter is only one step away from abandoning Jesus.

As I said last Sunday, most people who stop following Jesus don’t do it suddenly or all at once. It is usually a slow drift or a downward slide on a slippery slope. It usually happens one small step at a time. Most of the time it is so slow that we are not even aware of our drift. We thought we were moored to the anchor, but the next thing we know, we are going over Niagara Falls.

Friends, we gradually drift from the truth of the gospel by minimizing worship of Jesus. We gradually stop praying. We gradually drift when our intake of God’s word becomes less and less. Then, our church attendance and worshipping with God’s people becomes less and less important until it disappears. Then we don’t listen to the encouragement and exhortations of our friends to return to Jesus and His church. The final drift is when we reject the warnings from God’s word and God’s people.

Here’s the other side of the coin of drifting. When we drift from Jesus, we don’t drift into neutrality. We drift into sin, and except for the grace of God, we will shipwreck our lives.

I don’t know what drifting looks like in your life. Perhaps the drift begins with a lustful thought, a fantasy, and then a lustful look. Perhaps it is clicking on a website that you shouldn’t. Perhaps it is a jealous thought of a person that turns into gossip. I don’t know exactly what that step looks like for you, but it’s usually a small step away from Jesus, which is always accompanied by a step toward sin.

Hebrews 2:1 gives us a warning about drifting. The writer of Hebrews says:

Therefore we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it.

Now, let’s work through our text and see how Peter disowned Jesus. Peter’s first denial is in vv. 69-70:

Now Peter was sitting outside in the courtyard. And a servant girl came up to him and said, “You also were with Jesus the Galilean.”⁷⁰ But he denied it before them all, saying, “I do not know what you mean.”

Peter’s first step away from Jesus was a mild question from a little servant girl. She wasn’t powerful, nor did she hold any position in the court. She didn’t threaten him or raise her voice. She didn’t accuse him of anything. She didn’t call him a blasphemer. Her comment was non-threatening, but amazingly, it caught Peter off guard.

Perhaps Peter was anticipating a grand defense of Jesus, like in the Garden when he cut off the servant’s ear, but his temptation didn’t come that way. His temptation to deny Jesus blindsided him, so his first denial of Jesus was a vague response. He said,

“I do not know what you mean.”

We are like Peter, aren’t we? We’re trucking along in life, and we think we are strong in our faith. We tell ourselves we will stand for Jesus and even die with Him if necessary, but then some small thing comes along and distracts us. It catches us off guard, and we willingly walk away from Jesus into sin. Friends, like Peter, we think a

small sin is harmless, but before you know it, this seemingly small sin has taken you many steps in a direction you didn't anticipate or plan to go.

Look at Peter's second denial of Jesus. This denial is stronger. Look in vv. 71-72.

And when he went out to the entrance, another servant girl saw him, and she said to the bystanders, "This man was with Jesus of Nazareth." ⁷² And again he denied it with an oath: "I do not know the man."

A small step away from Jesus leads him further down the dead-end road of denial. Again, another servant girl identified Peter as one of Jesus' disciples.

The second accusation was more forceful than the first one. She made the same accusation, but instead of addressing Peter directly, she directed her accusation to the crowd of bystanders watching the trial. She pointed Peter out saying,

"This man was with Jesus of Nazareth."

This time, Peter swore an oath that he didn't know Jesus, saying,

"I do not know the man."

The contrast between Jesus and Peter is growing ever wider. Also, Jesus' prediction that Peter would deny Him is coming true, but Peter seems blind to his sin.

Again, we can identify with Peter's rapid descent into the madness of sin, can't we? Sin continued to take him further than he wanted to go until he found himself at the bottom.

Finally, we see in Peter's third denial in vv. 73-74:

After a little while the bystanders came up and said to Peter, "Certainly you too are one of them, for your accent betrays you." ⁷⁴ Then he began to invoke a curse on himself and to swear, "I do not know the man." And immediately the rooster crowed.

As you can see, Peter's third denial is stronger and worse than the previous two. His drift is complete, and he has walked away from Jesus in order to save his own skin.

This time, a group of bystanders accused Peter of being one of Jesus' disciples. They have figured out his connection with Jesus. They no longer question Peter but accuse him with certainty. What is their proof? His Galilean accent has given him away.

Verse 74 tells us that he not only denied knowing Jesus with an oath but he also called on God to punish him if he was lying. This was his strongest denial. He would have said something along the lines of:

May God strike me dead where I stand if I am lying to you.

Peter had finally reached the bottom of this slippery slope. He had finally and fully drifted away just as Jesus told him he would.

Think about it. He lied about knowing Jesus. Then he swore a false oath that he knew Jesus. Finally, he called on God to curse him if he was lying. The old saying is true:

Sin will take you further than you want to go, keep you longer than you want to stay, and make you pay more than you want to pay.

Verse 75 closes the scene on Peter's descent into the abyss of denial:

And Peter remembered the saying of Jesus, "Before the rooster crows, you will deny me three times." And he went out and wept bitterly.

Luke 22:60-62 paints a painful scene of the conclusion of Peter's denial of Jesus:

But Peter said, "Man, I do not know what you are talking about." And immediately, while he was still speaking, the rooster crowed. ⁶¹ And the Lord turned and looked at Peter. And Peter remembered the saying of the Lord, how he had said to him, "Before the rooster crows today, you will deny me three times." ⁶² And he went out and wept bitterly.

Commentators tell us that Jesus could see out a window into the courtyard where Peter was denying Him. When Peter's third denial occurred, Jesus looked in Peter's direction and their eyes locked, and the rooster crowed. All of this occurred at the same time. Then Peter remembered that Jesus had told him he would disown Him three times. His heart broke. So, he ran out of the courtyard and wept bitterly over his sin. Friends, this is the proper response to our sin.

Yet, Peter's story, as sad as it is, has the light of grace shining through it. Let's apply the text and consider some takeaways from this passage. I want us to consider five lessons we learn from Peter's failure.

This incident of Peter's failure is recorded for us so that we will heed the warning of the danger of sin. Remember, no one, who is a follower of Jesus, gets out of bed one morning and decides they will simply deny Jesus. There is always a gradual drift from Jesus.

But why? Why do we drift from Jesus? We drift because we do not learn the lesson from Peter's story. We drift because we don't pay attention to our hearts and lives. As Hebrews 2:1,

Therefore we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it.

When we consider Peter's drift from Christ, here's what we learn:

First, we must guard against pride. Looking back over Peter's life in the gospels, we find a pattern of pride in his life. Peter, in his zeal to follow Jesus became prideful.

Peter seemed to believe he was a lone ranger kind of disciple with special spiritual strength. He believed he didn't need anyone because Jesus had changed his name to the Rock.

Remember what he told Jesus in v. 33. After Jesus told His disciples that they would fall away because of Him, Peter, looking at his fellow disciples, said,

Though they all fall away because of you, I will never fall away.

Peter had an inflated view of himself and looked down on his fellow disciples. He believed he was better than them.

Brothers and sisters, may we never come into our church worship services or gospel life groups or any other gathering of our fellowship and believe we are somehow more spiritual or better disciples. May we never believe we don't need one another as we follow Jesus. May we never say, *"Others in this body may walk away from Christ but I won't."*

Friends, the gospel is for weak people. It is for losers who know they don't have it all together. As James 4:6 says:

"God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble."

The drift begins when we think we have it all together. When we believe we can do it on our own and don't need our church family.

May the Lord make us to be poor in spirit. May we humble ourselves before the Lord, depending on Jesus and our brothers and sisters in Christ, so that our faith in the person and work of Jesus translates into a culture of grace here at Grand.

Second, we must believe biblical warnings. Scripture constantly warns us that temptations will come, so be prepared. Remember, Jesus warned Peter that he would stumble and fall away right after he declared faithfulness to everyone. This warning, while not specifically for us, gives us a warning in principle.

Friends, temptation to sin and fall away will come. 1 Corinthians 10:12 says,

Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall.

As I said earlier, I don't know what drifting looks like in your life but the temptation to walk away from Jesus will come. It won't begin with big steps but small seemingly harmless spiritual neglect and/or small sins.

The good news is that when we are tempted the Lord has already provided a way of escape if we will take it. The Apostle Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 10:13,

No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.

We must listen to the warnings of Scripture. They remind us and caution us not to think we are strong. They remind us that we are weak and dependent on Christ's strength. This leads us to our third lesson.

Third, we must not fail to pray. Peter didn't pray when he was most vulnerable. Instead, he slept. Friends, Peter and the disciples' failure to pray reminds us of the place of prayer in the disciple's life.

One of the main reasons we don't pray is because we wrongly believe we are strong. We don't pray because we believe we can just press through the day without praying for ourselves or others.

The truth is we desperately need to pray because we are weak. We pray because we need Jesus to help us. When we confess that we are weak and needy to God, He is glorified as we depend on Him. The Giver of our strength gets the glory and we are filled with His peace, joy, and strength. So, Jesus' words to His disciples in Matthew 26:41 are for us:

Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.

Fourth, we must repent of our sins. After this point, Matthew's Gospel doesn't mention Peter anymore. However, what we do know from the other gospels is that Jesus restored Peter. Peter's bitter weeping after he heard the rooster crow was not like Judas' tears.

Remember what Jesus told Peter. He told him He would go to Galilee before he got there. He would be waiting on them to return. What we know is that Jesus went there so He could not only restore Peter but all of His disciples, except for Judas. Jesus was going to give the gift of repentance to Peter and His disciples. Jesus was like the Father in the parable of the Prodigal Son. He was waiting on them with open arms.

Here's the deal. Jesus didn't pursue Peter because he was good at repenting. He wasn't. The key is that just as Jesus pursued Peter for repentance and restoration, He also pursues us. Friends, I don't know where you are with Jesus but He is pursuing you. Stop running away from Jesus and run to Him.

Jesus is ready for our repentance. On the cross, He purchased by His atonement, grace for our repentance. Romans 2:4 says that,

God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance.

God, in His kindness and grace, pursues us to lead us back to Him and away from our sin. He doesn't do this only for one time repentance, but He made the gift of repentance a gift of grace that lasts a lifetime. This leads us to our fifth lesson.

Fifth, we must receive the grace of God in Christ. As we have considered Peter's failure, we've talked a lot about Peter. I want to close by focusing on how Jesus loved Peter despite His abandonment and denial.

Luke 22:61 tells us that when the rooster crowed, Jesus looked at Peter. Their eyes locked in a painful gaze. I don't believe that Jesus looked at Peter and frowned or looked disgusted after he disowned Jesus.

I believe Jesus looked at Peter in love. So, with His face still covered with spit and bruised from being hit, Jesus looked at Peter and loved him. Yes, Jesus' heart was broken but Jesus knew He was going before him to Galilee. Jesus saw what Peter would become as a result of His suffering at the hands of sinners, His death on the cross, His resurrection from the dead, and His ascension to Heaven.

Jesus still looks at sinners in love and calls them to come to Him. He pursues us in love and mercy. Won't you receive the grace and mercy of Jesus today? Call on the Lord to save you. Turn from your sin and fall into the gracious arms of the One who gave His life so that you could live with Him for all eternity.

Conclusion: Friends, we don't come to Jesus for salvation because we deserve it, have earned it, or are worthy of it. We come to Jesus for salvation because He is worthy and we are weak and unable to save ourselves. This is good news because the gospel is for losers.