



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of Dan Duncan

Mark 14: 66-72

Mark

"Peter Before the Servants"

TRANSCRIPT

And we are continuing our study where we left off. Mark, chapter 16 verses 66 through 72. So if you have your Bibles open, follow along with me as I read.

As Peter was below in the courtyard, one of the servant-girls of the high priest came, and seeing Peter warming himself, she looked at him and said, "You also were with Jesus the Nazarene." But he denied it, saying, "I neither know nor understand what you are talking about." And he went out onto the porch. The maid saw him, and began once more to say to the bystanders, "This is one of them!" But again he denied it. And after a little while the bystanders were again saying to Peter, "Surely you are one of them, for you are a Galilean too." But he began to curse and swear, "I do not know this man you are talking about!" Immediately a cock crowed a second time. And Peter remembered how Jesus had made the remark to him, "Before a cock crows twice, you will deny Me three times." And he began to weep.

May the Lord bless this reading of His word and bless our time of study in it together. Shall we pray?

[Prayer] Our gracious heavenly Father, we do thank You for the privilege we have again this morning to come together, to open the Scriptures and study them, to sing hymns of praise to You and to fellowship with one another. We pray that You would make our time together very fruitful, very productive in our own hearts, that You would build us up in the faith as we consider the things before us, that You would open the truth of Scripture to us and guide us and direct us in our thinking, and

in so doing, equip our minds and prepare our hearts for the week that is before us, that we might be good and faithful witnesses. That we might not do as Peter did in the passage we consider this morning, not hide in the darkness, not seek to compromise our testimony but live boldly in the midst of the world and proclaim Christ and show our identity with Him. That's a difficult thing to do, Lord; in our own strength we cannot do it, and so we ask that You would strengthen us and equip us and prepare us for that great task.

We pray Lord for this assembly. Not only in that sense in which we would be good witnesses. We pray that, Father, we pray that You'd bless all of the classes this morning that meet, that the word would be taught well and that we would be well-instructed. But we also pray Lord for our physical conditions. You instruct us to pray in that way, to ask for our daily bread, and we do that. We pray that You'd bless all of those who are employed, that You would continue to employ them, continue to enable them to work diligently, that they might be good providers for their families. We remember those who are without employment and ask that You might bless them and give them employment, that they might engage in that very important responsibility of making provision for themselves and their families.

We pray for the sick. We remember particularly Stan Haug and pray that You'd give him recovery at home. We pray for Kay Howard. We pray for Barbara White. We pray that You'd give recovery to these individuals if that please You, that You would bless them in the treatments that they are receiving. We pray for others, Lord, that You might give physical strength. And in the midst of the affliction that they are going through, we pray that You would give them spiritual blessing as well. May they sense Christ's presence and look to Him. Help us to do that now, Father, as we look into the Scriptures, as we sing our final hymn. May our hearts be turned toward You and may them be prepared for the time of study we have together. We pray these things in Christ's name. Amen.

[Message] The other day I was reading an article by Chuck Colson in which he said that today's culture worships the goddess of tolerance. I think that's certainly correct. We live in a time of moral tolerance, or perhaps better to say a time of moral indifference, a time in which celebrities can engage in outrageous behavior and the world looks the other way or even admires it and seeks to emulate it.

We live in a time of great tolerance, and yet there are some things that the world doesn't tolerate, some things that the world will never forgive. It's not a very long list, I suppose, but high on that list is the act of betrayal. Dante, for example, in his divine comedy, describes hell in terms of circles. There are nine circles in hell, and each circle descends into an even more severe place, and so that the worst circle of all is the ninth circle. And in that circle of hell, Dante put traitors. And right in the middle of it is Judas, along with Lucifer, Brutus, and Cassius, men who betrayed their benefactors.

And we can see the same thing in our own history. The name that is almost as famous as that of George Washington is Benedict Arnold, a name that's synonymous with the word "traitor." Brilliant man, a brilliant general, a brave soldier. He almost achieved greatness in our own history, but instead he earned a place of lasting shame when he betrayed his country. Even in England where he lived after the war, he was rejected and ostracized by the people. And so, as a result, lived out his life as a sick, bitter, and lonely man.

The world will tolerate many sins. But betrayal is not one of them. Betrayal in politics, betrayal in business, betrayal in marriage, betrayal is a terrible offense. But if we judge betrayal of country or betrayal of friends as a terrible sin, how much more terrible is the sin when one betrays his God and Savior? That's what Peter did. That's Peter's sin. Sin that carried infinite guilt and shame.

What's particularly alarming about that is that it's Peter who did it. Peter. An apostle. A man who walked with the Lord for some three years, who enjoyed the Lord's company, listened to His teaching, engaged Himself in the ministry with the Lord, witnessed miracles, witnessed His glorious revelation on the Mount of Transfiguration. The man who knew the Lord, who loved the Lord, a man who vowed to die for the Lord. And yet, when the test came, he failed the Lord and he failed him terribly. And if any lesson should stand out in this affair, it's the lesson that if Peter could do that, Peter who was an apostle, then so can you, and so can I. That's what's alarming in our passage. That's the warning of our passage.

And yet, along with that warning is the encouraging truth that as bad as that sin may be, as bad as any sin may be, and all sin is of infinite guilt, but as bad as that may be, God forgives and restores the repentant sinner. The world may not forgive some sins, but God forgives all sin in the repentant man or woman. We see that here.

Now, you'll remember from a week or two weeks ago, the Lord has been arrested and led away to the palace of the high priest where He has been put on trial before the Sanhedrin. They have gathered there and they have brought witnesses forward to testify against the Lord, and they have made their accusations. But all of it has failed. It has not supported the prosecution's case against the Lord because all of the testimony was contradictory, and so proved invalid.

And so finally, Caiaphas, the high priest, steps forward and he asks the Lord: "Are You the Christ?" And when the Lord answered, "I am," the courtroom erupted in its conviction of Him. They condemned Him of blasphemy and condemned Him to death. That was the trial of our Lord before the Sanhedrin.

But outside the palace, another trial was going on involving Peter and the service. And so, the scene now shifts to that trial in the courtyard where Peter had entered, where he had sat down to warm himself by a fire. Now, Peter initially, when the Lord was arrested in the garden, had fled with the other disciples. They'd all panicked. They'd all left. They'd all gone into the darkness. But somewhere along the line, shortly thereafter, Peter stopped and he collected his courage, and he turned around and he began to follow the Lord.

Mark describes this in verse 54. He says that he "followed Him at a distance." So he puts some distance between them, but he did follow the Lord. In fact, he followed Him all the way into Caiaphas' palace. The palace was built around an open courtyard, entered through an archway, and we know from John's account of these events that Peter was able to enter because he was with another disciple who had connections with the high priest and was known by the servant at the gate. And so, they were allowed to come in.

Peter came in, moved quietly over by the fire, and he sat down with some officers who were warming themselves there. Why was he there? Why does Peter, a man who originally flees in panic, turn around, come back, and enter into the very camp of the enemy? Well, he was there no doubt because he loved the Lord, and he wanted to know what was happening to the Lord. And we have to give him some credit for that. Because while the other disciples had fled, and they'd made their way over the Mount of Olives and no doubt to some safe haven perhaps in Bethany, and they were hiding out there in fear, Peter collected his courage and he came back and he followed the Lord. And it must've taken a great deal of courage on his part to do

that, and not only to follow the Lord, but to enter into the very courtyard of the priest, and sit down with the enemy right next to them.

Everyone else is hiding, but Peter is there in the courtyard of the enemy. I think that we have to say the thing that drew Peter there was his love for the Lord. He had a love for the Lord, and a true love. And yet, it's a strange scene, isn't it? To see Peter warming himself around the fire of the enemy, trying to blend in, hoping to go unnoticed by these men. The Lord's disciple secretly borrowing heat from the enemy.

It's a disturbing picture, really, and it's a picture of a man, picture of a Christian, trying to live in two worlds. And, it can't be done. Matthew Henry, the old Puritan, wrote, "Those that warm themselves with the evildoers grow cold towards good people and good things. And those that are fond of the devil's fireside are in danger of the devil's fire." We can't compromise our position with the world. We can't borrow the world's heat without getting burned. And so, for all of his courage, and we will admit that Peter had a great deal of courage when he went back to follow the Lord. But for all of his courage, he was very naïve, and he was in danger of being burned.

He had already deserved the Lord. He had already fled and deserted Him with the others, and he ought to have recognized his weakness in that, and he ought to have remembered the very words that the Lord had told him earlier, when He said that he would deny Him, when He said that they would all fall away. But in spite of his failure, Peter still was filled with self-confidence, the same self-confidence that he showed earlier when the Lord had made that announcement, and he had adamantly denied it.

And so, he foolishly follows. He foolishly puts himself in this place of great temptation. As long as we are in the world, we are going to face temptation from the world, and from the flesh, and from all of the aspects for which sin can approach us. And to a great degree, that's unavoidable. There are many temptations that you and I face that we cannot avoid. They are there, and we can't get around them.

But that's not true of every temptation. In fact, many, many temptations are temptations that we can avoid. Perhaps the best way to overcome temptation, a temptation that we may fall prey to frequently, the best way to overcome it is not to face it at all. It's to avoid it completely. It is to stay out of those places where it is, and to stay away from those things that are most tempting to us, to train our eyes to

look away, to keep ourselves from certain companions, or whatever the case may be. Just to stay away and avoid such situations.

But Peter couldn't stay away, couldn't stay away from this temptation. In fact, he didn't recognize it as a temptation, didn't recognize his own weakness, and that's one of the reasons he's there. He didn't believe the Lord's warning. He wanted to follow the Lord's trial, and so he put himself deliberately in the very place that would cause him to stumble, sitting next to the fire of the enemy where he would, himself, get burned.

But then, the Lord had warned him about this. Simon, Satan has demanded permission to sift you like wheat. And the sifting began with an accusation from a servant-girl. She saw him in the fire light and recognized him as one of the Lord's disciples. Perhaps she had seen him earlier in the week when the Lord was in the temple. And of course, the Lord, from the time he entered Jerusalem in the so-called triumphal entry was the focus of a great deal of attention. He was there in the temple every day teaching, and the enemies of the Lord were crowding around him, and many, many people were there listening to what he had to say.

And perhaps this servant-girl had been there, and you can imagine that if she saw the disciples with the Lord, the one disciple that would've stood out is Peter. He would've been the most vocal, the most recognizable. And so, she sees him in the fire, sees him sitting by the fire in the light of that fire, and she recognizes him. And she says, "You too were with Jesus the Nazarene." Now, that's not a friendly comment that she's making. In fact, there is a note of contempt in her words. It is literally something like, "the Nazarene Jesus." And you'll remember earlier in our Lord's ministry, in John chapter 1, when Nathaniel is being introduced to the Lord, and he says, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Now, I think that's the sense in which this young slave girl is speaking of Jesus, that Nazarene, Jesus. And there's contempt in what she's saying, and so suddenly, Peter realizes that his cover is blown, and he knows from the tone of what she's saying, and just from the surroundings that he's in hostile territory.

That's when all the courage that he had mustered and he had boasted about evaporated. He says, "I neither know nor understand what you are talking about." And he went out from there, left the fire, and went on to the porch.

Now, this is the same man that a few hours earlier had adamantly denied that he would fall away. He swore that "even if I have to die with You, I will not deny You." And now, what's he saying? I don't know that man. I don't know what you're talking. And he moves away. And this is the man that also had taken a sword into the garden, even fought with the soldiers, or at least attempted to. He charged the soldiers and began swinging and lopped off the ear of Malchus, the servant of the high priest. He showed that he was ready to die as a martyr in defense of the Lord.

And yet now, how do we see him? Defeated by a girl, by a slave-girl. Suddenly, the man of courage becomes a coward. Well, I say suddenly. Of course, it's not sudden. No fall into sin, no failure is ever sudden. It may occur suddenly, but if it does, it's still the result of a long-festering process. And we see that in Peter. That's the case in this failure on his part.

His failure can be traced in stages, along a line of earlier failures, which began with his overconfidence. Now, to say that is really to say with his unbelief. He was confident in himself because he didn't believe what the Lord was saying to him. The Lord told him, clearly, in no uncertain terms, Peter, before the cock crows twice, you shall deny me three times.

But Peter didn't believe Him. He thought he knew better. That's why he's in the courtyard here, in a place of great temptation, because he did not believe the Lord. He trusted in himself. He thought he knew better, and he did what we so often do, all of us do: he leaned on his own understanding, on his own strength, and that's always the first step toward a fall.

The next step was to fail to pray. In the garden, you'll remember, the Lord had told Peter and the rest of disciples that they were to be watching and praying. Keep watching. Keep praying. It's urgent. And He warned them of that, but Peter didn't do that. Instead, as you'll remember, he slept. And he slept while the Lord prayed. Now, there's some irony in that scene, I think. Because if there's anyone in the garden that evening, in fact, anyone in the city of Jerusalem or throughout the whole world that we wouldn't think needed to pray, it was the Lord Himself. And yet, He is the one that enters into prayer, prayed earnestly.

In fact, that was the pattern of His life. He would rise early and pray. He would pray into the late hours of the night and into the morning. The pattern of His life was one of prayer. The one person we would think needed to pray, in fact, did

need to pray in that garden was Peter, particularly after the warnings the Lord had given. And yet, what's he do? He doesn't pray. He sleeps.

James Boice writes, "Unfortunately, the church and many Christians are asleep today with no less warning." Paul said, "Pray without ceasing," yet it is often the case that we do not pray because we do not think it necessary. That's true. I will say that when I look at my own life. Prayer is, for some reason, a very difficult thing to enter into. In fact, I think if we're honest, we would say prayer's kind of a nuisance. It just gets in the way. You know you're supposed to do it, and yet you've got so many other things to do. You've got to get up in the morning, get the kids off, and have your cup of coffee and read the paper. Got to get that done. Then you've got to get to work. You've got to get into the chores of the day. And then when you come home, you've got all of those other things to do. And if you're going to read your Bible, you've got to read your Bible. If you pray, you can't both read your Bible and pray.

And so it goes. We tend to look at it as something of a nuisance. And yet, it is essential, essential if we are going to live a life that is not filled with difficulties. We've got to be men and women who keep watching and keep praying, who study the Scriptures, who are diligent in our reading of the Bible, and diligent in our prayer life, as difficult. As it may be, that's a pattern of our life that we must develop.

Yet, Peter did not do that. He didn't pray. And then, he followed the Lord at a distance when he should've been near to Him. And finally, he went into this very place of temptation, a place he should've avoided knowing his weakness and knowing the warnings that the Lord had given. And yet, with all of this confidence and this unbelief, he enters into this place.

And what occurred, occurred. Not suddenly. Oh, suddenly for the moment, yes, but as a result of a long process. Peter did not lose the battle at the fireside. He lost the battle earlier in the evening when he failed to look to the Lord, when he failed to listen to the Lord, when he failed to watch and pray. And so, he denied the Lord once. "I neither know nor understand what you are talking about." Then, in fear, he retreated to the porch, to the archway that led into the street.

He doesn't go into the street. He stays there. He was fearful for his own safety, and so he moves away from that slave girl, moves away from the fire, doesn't want to be recognized in the glow of that light. But he can't leave. He stays there. He can't completely abandon the Lord. And so, he stays while trying to hide in the

darkness. I think we see another illustration in Peter in the darkness there. Picture of a secret disciple. I think there are such people. I think some would deny that a Christian can be a secret disciple, and yet I think that's true. I think we all live sometimes in our lives as secret disciples, or at some time during the day, we will live as a secret disciple. Not fully committed to the Lord. Again, not actually abandoning Him, not abandoning Him in our heart, but maybe not wanting to be obviously known as one, not being known as identified with Christ in the office or wherever we may be.

Peter followed the Lord but at a distance, not getting too close. And then, again here, he stayed near the courtyard, but he hid in the dark, trying not to identify himself as the Lord's disciple. We do that, I think, and I guess we have to ask ourselves why it is that we do that. What is it that would cause us to want to be a secret disciple? Well, I suppose it's our fear of the world, fear of the opinion that men might have of us. But it's never a satisfactory situation, even if we're able to maintain that hiddenness, and be able to live with the world thinking well of us, thinking that we're just like them, and having nothing in the way of ridicule for us. Nevertheless, it cannot be a satisfying situation for us, and I'm sure Peter, as he stood in the dark, was miserable, as we will be.

We're certainly not safer putting ourselves at a distance from the Lord. The safest place that we can be is right near Him, identifying with Him openly before the world. That's always God's will for us to be near His Son, regardless of how dangerous that might seem from the circumstances. It's always the safest place to be. The exposure might be greater, but the danger is less. We're never going to be comfortable trying to fit in with the world. We're never going to be comfortable trying to do what Peter did, sitting with the officers and warming himself by the fire.

And yet, again I think that's what we do so often. We often find the world more entertaining than the church, and it is. The world is far more entertaining than the church. And that's what makes it so alluring. There are other things as well, but that's certainly the case. We can't expect that the church and the study of the Scriptures and the work of the ministry is going to be nearly as entertaining or amusing as the world and the things of the world. I mention that because if we live in a day in which we worship the goddess of tolerance, and I think we also must say we

worship the god of amusement, because that is something that is very strong and very alluring, and very powerful in our own day.

And yet, having said that and admitting that the church cannot be a place of amusement and entertainment like the world, nevertheless, we will never find in the world the fulfilment and the satisfaction and the challenge that we find in the church, and in living for Jesus Christ.

Warning against sitting by the fire of the enemies as we see Peter doing here is not to be understood as a suggestion that we should have nothing to do with the world, that we should withdraw completely from the world and have nothing to do with that. That of course is not the case at all. We should be involved with the world. We should be out there rubbing shoulders with men and women of the world, and being a light to the world. That's what we've been commissioned to do. The Lord has sent us out into the world not to withdraw from it. There's nothing wrong with being by the fireside of the enemy as long as the enemy knows who you are. It's trying to blend in with the world that's the difficulty.

There's nothing here that would suggest that we should withdraw from the world. Yet, that's sometimes the problem. The extreme that others go to. And Paul had to correct that with the Corinthians, you remember. He had told them in a letter that they were not to associate with immoral people. But he did not mean by that that they were not to associate with men and women of the world. Then, he writes, you would have to go out of the world, and we can't do that. And even if we could, we're not supposed to do that. God wants us in the world, but not of the world, and we can do both. We can be in the world without being of the world. There are a number of examples of this.

One example, an outstanding example I think, is that of the Countess of Huntington, a woman who not only used her wealth to promote the spread of the gospel in 18th century England, but also used her position to introduce men and women of the upper class to the gospel, a class of people who had very little interest in spiritual things. In fact, one writer describes the aristocrats of that day as "mainly godless; the majority frivoleed away their time in refinements of luxury and vice."

A number of her peers were in a club called the Hellfire Club, which made sport of things spiritual. And yet, she was a fervent witness for the Lord and turned her home into a center of evangelical activity where many of these people, some of

the most notorious aristocrats of her day, came and heard the preaching of George Whitfield and other evangelists as well. She used her position and her money and her time to introduce her worldly friends to the gospel and influence English society at large. She didn't withdraw. She was there, but she was very clear in her testimony and her use of her time. They knew what she was. They knew where she stood. I think they respected her for that. They came to her home and they listened to the gospel preached.

Now, God doesn't put us all in that kind of an environment with that kinds of means to use, but He puts us somewhere. We're all somewhere in the world, and we're to use our time and our effort in that way to be a service to Him. We're not to withdraw. We're to be a witness. But, the truth of the matter is: it's much easier to withdraw. That's a temptation, to withdraw into the shadows, to follow the Lord from a distance, to fit in with the enemy, just like Peter did. And yet, we can't be happy like that. We can't be fulfilled like that. Not for long at least.

There's no contentment in compromise, and the Lord will not permit us to do that. He will not permit us to live out our Christian life in that secret kind of way in putting distance between ourselves and the Lord and trying to hide our identity. Eventually, it will become known. Or, the opportunity for it to become known will be presented to us. And He certainly dealt with Peter in this way. He dealt with Peter in a way of disciple.

He wouldn't let him stay in hiding. That same slave girl who had exposed him earlier by the fireside went after him again. She was relentless, and she found him there in the dark by the archway, and she started telling everyone: "This is one of them." And for a second time, Peter denies it. But this time, those standing around in the courtyard began to be suspicious. Peter hid his appearance in the darkness, but he couldn't hide the sound or the accent of his voice. And evidently, he did have a Galilean accent, and it began to betray him. In fact, the more that he began to protest, the more it became obvious that he was not from Jerusalem. Evidently, he couldn't pronounce the gutturals of the language or something about his speech identified him as a man of Galilee, the region from which Christ came.

And so, with each denial, the men could tell that Peter wasn't one of them. He wasn't from the city; he was from the country. He was from Galilee, where Jesus had come from. So they began talking among themselves. And after a little while began

to challenge Peter and say, "Surely, you are one of them, for you are a Galilean, too." John tells us that one of the relatives of Malchus, that servant whose ear Peter had chopped off, was there in the courtyard as well, and recognized him and said, "Didn't I see you in the garden?"

So now, Peter was desperate. Everyone suspected him. They were closing in on him. As one writer puts it: "He was like a cornered animal." And so, for a third time, Peter denies the Lord. "I do not know this fellow you are talking about!" But this time he punctuated his denial with cursing and swearing. He violently rejected Christ. Cursed His name. Have you ever cursed or swore at someone? I know no one in this company's ever done anything like that, not even on Central Expressway. But maybe you've seen it happen and you know the anger that's behind that kind of an act.

Peter was an angry man. He was angry at Christ, angry because of what his association with Him might cost him. Well, this slave girl might ridicule him and these men might mock him perhaps will even strike him. And who knows? Maybe his life will be lost for Christ, the very thing he swore that he would be glad to give up. Now he's desperately holding onto it and angry at the Lord because of the association that he had with Him. And so, he seeks to put distance between himself and the Lord. He rejects Him with cursing and swearing. He calls down damnation on Him who had only blessed him in every way. Cursed the one who had healed his mother-in-law, cursed the one who had saved him from drowning, cursed the one who had given him the special privilege of seeing the revelation of His glory on the Mount of Transfiguration, cursed the one who had introduced him to the grace of God, cursed the one who would die for him on the cross.

Didn't know Him, curses Him, disowns Him three times. How do you measure the ingratitude, the weight of such a sin, as Peter commits here? It's difficult. Guilt of it is infinite. Ingratitude, however, that he suddenly realized when, for a second time, the cock crowed. That's when Mark writes in verse 72 that he remembered the Lord's words before: "Before a cock crows twice, you will deny Me three times."

Luke tells us that at that moment, Jesus looked at Peter. We don't know how that look took place, but it may be that at this time, they were moving Jesus from that trial before the Sanhedrin to the trial with Pilate. And as He's passing through the

courtyard, Peter makes this third denial. And when that occurs, and the cock crowed, the Lord turned and looked at Peter with eyes that pierced his heart. What an amazing scene that is. Suddenly, they make contact and Peter sees the Lord looking right at him. Not with anger in his eyes, not with a rebuke, but with sadness and with a reminder, and I think with forgiveness.

Suddenly, it all came back to Peter. Suddenly he realized what he had done. It crushed him, and he ran from the courtyard in a flood of tears. Luke writes that he wept bitterly. That's the result of not watching, the result of not praying, of trying to live in two worlds of trying to be a disciple while warming oneself by the fire of the enemy. It can't be done. It can only result in compromise. It can only result in bitterness and tears, ultimately.

Charles Spurgeon once talked to a girl who was not wholeheartedly living for Christ. She was trying to live in the world, trying to pursue the things of the world and yet maintain some kind of a following of the Lord as well. So he said to her, "There are three things that you can do, and those three things I will set before you by way of an illustration. When you get outside of the tabernacle," and as you know, he's preached in London in the Metropolitan Tabernacle. He says, "You go outside. There'll be a tram car." Trams are still very popular in Europe. In fact, I rode a tram on a few occasions this past week in Bucharest. It's very much like a street car, or a trolley, or a bus. It's essentially the same thing as a bus. So he says there'll be a tram car outside. "Now, when you go outside, go up in the tram, but keep one foot on the ground. And if you don't come down with a smash, then I'm very much mistaken. Yet many people try to keep in with the world and keep in with Christ, and they will never do it, but will make a terrible fall of it, ultimately.

"Now, the second thing you can do is that you can keep standing in the world, standing in the mud and not get into the car at all. You can just stop there and let the tram car go by." He said, "That's all fair and straight. And if you want to live in world, then live in the world. Take from the world what the world has to offer. Take all of the pleasure that you can get from the world and be ready to reap the fruit of it at last. But there's a third thing that you can do, namely, get right off the road into the car and let it take you right where it is going."

Now, it's this third thing that I commend to you. Get right into Christ and let the Lord Jesus, by the power of His Holy Spirit carry you right away from the unclean

place where you now stand, bearing you in safety along the tramlines of holiness till He brings you to the terminus of glory at His own right hand. That's good advice. We're frequently tempted to follow Christ at a distance, to fit in with the world, to keep one foot on the ground while we try to follow Christ with the other, and it won't work. It will result in a terrible fall.

Peter's an example of that. His experience is a good example of the consequences of that kind of life, of trying to live in both worlds. It can't be done. For the Christian, that will always be one of bitterness and one of guilt. Peter's an example of that, but Peter's also a wonderful example of how the Lord restores the Christian who fails, how the Lord removes the guilt. Even when it's restoration from sin that men can never forgive. And Peter's sin was that great. It's the kind of sin that men would've expelled Peter for, betrayal, betrayal of His benefactor, betrayal of the Son of God Himself.

And on the surface, you look at Peter and you really don't see any difference between him and Judas. The one betrayed the Lord with a kiss. The other betrayed the Lord with a curse. What's the difference? On the surface, there is no difference, but there is a difference, and the difference lay in the heart. Peter was a true child of God, and though his sin was so serious that he probably would've been expelled from the society of men, never forgiven by the world, nevertheless, God did not expel him. God chose to receive Peter and bless him. And so, his experience not only sounds an alarm to the dangers that we face if we are not watching and praying, but it also gives the assurance that the way of repentance is always open.

And though sin has its consequences, and sometimes the sins that we commit have lifelong consequences, we'll always bear the scars of those sins. Nevertheless, God begins with us where we are, and He renews us, and He makes us productive when we turn to Him. Peter is a great example of that, because Peter's productiveness, Peter's usefulness was even greater after this. This is what the Lord promised to do for Peter even before he failed and failed so miserably. You remember, and Luke records that He said to Peter just hours before Peter betrayed Him, He said that Satan would "sift you like wheat." But He adds that He had prayed for Peter, and then says, "When once you have turned again, strengthen your brothers."

So, as the cock crowed a second time, Peter had been sifted so thoroughly that all that was left in Peter was just a little grain of wheat, a little grain of faith, the size of a grain of wheat. And yet, God took that little bit of faith, caused it to grow, caused Peter to become very productive, a very useful servant, one who would help others, one who would strengthen his brethren as they pass through trials and they face those same temptations. He would later write, "Be of sober spirit. Be on the alert. Your adversary the devil prowls about like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour, seeking someone to sift like wheat." Then, later, He writes, "Therefore brethren, be all the more diligent to make certain about His calling in choosing you. For as long as you practice these things, you will never stumble."

Be diligent about it. As long as you're diligent, as long as you and I are giving our attention to the Word of God and to prayer, we're not going to stumble. That's spoken by a man who did stumble, and who stumbled terribly, who had a terrible fall, who became a traitor, who denied the Lord three times, and yet repented of what he did and was restored to useful service. That's the grace of God.

How great is God's grace? So great that it can forgive what the world can't forgive. Great enough to forgive the worst of sins and rescue sinners from hell itself. We ought to reflect on that. I think of Peter's, the lesson of Peter is just to mean a great deal to us. It's going to do so as we reflect upon the grace of God that we see in all of this, the grace that changed this man who committed a terrible injustice against his Savior, and yet Christ forgave it, restored him. As we reflect upon that, it should perform a great work within our own hearts, make us grateful, give us a desire to serve Him, desire to be a blessing. Because the Lord restores the sinner.

David Martyn Lloyd Jones tells an interesting story about such a failure. Dr. Jones, I know many of you are familiar with his books and his ministry, had a long and significant ministry in London's Westminster chapel. And he tells the story of a man who attended the church, a man who Lloyd Jones said "he was certain he was a Christian." He had been delivered from a life of drunkenness and immorality and became a fine Christian, and grew spiritually, he says, "in an astounding manner." But along the way, fell back into sin, as men so often do, and began to engage in some terrible things. He became guilty of adultery, even robbed from his wife and children, and then ran off with another woman and abandoned his family.

And Lloyd Jones recounted how people would come to him and say that that man was never a Christian, never truly was born again. And he would, if he had been born again, he would never do such things as he did. And Lloyd Jones would respond that in spite of what he had done, this man is still a Christian. This is backsliding. He is not going to end his life like that. But he went from bad to worse, and people would continue to say, "Now do you admit that this man was not a Christian?" And Lloyd Jones would say, "This man is a Christian. He is living in hell at the moment, but he will come back." Well, he continued his downward spiral. In fact, it became so bad, his drunkenness became so serious that the woman, his mistress, abandoned him. And he came to the place of committing suicide. But God miraculously turned him around.

And as I remember the story, hearing Dr. Jones tell it, he was standing on a bridge, contemplating jumping from that bridge when he heard the bells toll at a church steeple and thought, well, I'll go back and hear Lloyd Jones preach one more time. And so he went into the church, quietly slipped into the balcony where he wouldn't be seen. Just as he entered the balcony, he heard something said from the pulpit, something that Lloyd Jones said that pierced his heart and turned him around. He repented, and he was restored to the church. In fact, Lloyd Jones writes that he became very useful to the church, a very faithful servant, restored to his family and to ministry there. And then, he writes, he fell, but he was not utterly cast down.

Well, being born again doesn't mean being perfect or ever reaching a state of perfection. That goes without saying. We are going to be weak as long as we're in this flesh, as long as we're in this world, and we're going to stumble. We're going to fail the Lord on more than one occasion. That's just going to be the way it is because of what we are. There's sin in our members, as Paul describes it. That principle, or that law of sin that continually causes us to not do what we want to do, and to do the very things we don't want to do. But there's mercy and grace in our Lord. He never casts us off. We are to be watchful, we are to be prayerful, we are to live our lives like that, but know that when we fail, He doesn't cast us out. He restores us. And in fact, takes that life with its failures, and makes it even more useful, and uses those scars that we have as a result, to be to His praise and His glory and His service.

As He said to Peter, "When once you have turned again, strengthen your brothers." That's grace. Amazing grace. And it's yours in Christ. And so, as we

conclude this morning, let me ask you: are you in Christ? Have you stepped up into him completely? Have you put your trust and your faith in the Son of God who died for sinners so that all who believe in Him might have life eternal, the forgiveness of sins? Life that can never be taken away, salvation that is eternal, and you can never lose. Do you have that? If not, then believe in Jesus Christ, receive Him as Savior. And in so doing, receive the forgiveness of sins. Forgiveness that is so great that it forgives what the world cannot forgive, the greatest of sins. Sins that you and I, and ourselves, may not be able to forgive. He forgives it. He takes it all away, past, present, future. Sins, all of them, He takes away. As the psalmist says, He step rights them as far as the east is from the west, casts them into the depths of the sea. They can never have a claim on us again. We don't know Christ. Trust in Him, believe in Him, and enter into that life and forgiveness. Shall we stand now for the benediction?

[Prayer] Gracious heavenly Father, we do thank You for the grace that saves. Grace that is found in Your Son, whose death purchased our salvation, purchased eternal salvation, the forgiveness of sins for all who believe in Him. Father, we pray if there be any in attendance this morning who do not know Christ in a personal way, that You would so work upon their heart that they would recognize their need of a Savior and turn to Him and find salvation. And Father, for those of us who are Your children now, who know You through Your son, we do thank You for the grace that is eternal, that saves us from hell, and never abandons us, even when we live a life that strays from Your truth. When we fail like Peter failed, You never fail us, and You restore us. We thank You for that, and we thank You for that unconditional, eternal love. Help us to reflect well upon that and live in light of it. We pray in Christ's name. Amen.