

Communion

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[0 : 0 0] ago, we will be just in a few moments celebrating the Lord's Supper. And what is it that we do when we participate in this sacrament? Well, we know the answer to that question. We remember, we celebrate the death of Jesus, how Jesus died in the place of sinners, how He died in our place.

And that, of course, reminds us of why it was that Jesus died. Why was it that the Son of God would be handed over to death and death on a cross? Well, He died for our sin.

And there are many things that we can draw from these familiar truths, but there's one truth in particular that I would want to highlight and draw from it and spend some time considering this evening. And it is this, sin is serious. The death of Jesus announces many things, but it certainly announces this truth. Sin is serious, so serious that it required the death of the Son of God to atone for sin. Sin is a serious matter. Now, that's a truth that maybe many would find difficult to take seriously, if I can use that language. You know, we live in a day when sin is seen as something almost fun. You know, sin is fun. The word is used jokingly or certainly flippantly. Maybe even over the weekend, some of you may have been watching the rugby, and a rugby player, you know, puts in a bad tackle and they go to the sin bin. Well, it's not that bad. It's just a bad tackle. Ten minutes, and then you can come back again. Or sin is used as a word to speak of just an adventurous life, a fun life, just going slightly beyond or crossing a few lines, but it's fun to do so. That is the concept that many would have of sin. Nothing too serious at all. But the cross announces a very different truth. It declares to us that sin is indeed a very serious matter.

Now, I imagine that those of us here this evening would concur with that view. And many of us this evening will gather and participate in the Lord's Supper. We will be reminded, as we do, of the seriousness of sin. Reminded also, of course, of the great love of God in providing forgiveness for sin. But we will be reminded of the seriousness of sin. And as a result, tomorrow we will go into the week and we won't sin. Is that right? We'll be reminded how serious a matter it is, what price had to be paid to atone for our sins. So, obviously, we'll stop sinning. You know, as the meerkat says in the advert, simple. It's obvious, isn't it? Clearly, we're not going to carry on sinning once we've appreciated how serious a matter it is. But of course, we know that's not the case. What will actually happen is that we will leave this place. No doubt, many of us, perhaps all of us, we trust all of us, genuinely, sincerely grateful to God for His mercy and His forgiveness. But nonetheless, we will go into the week and we will sin. Now, we might say, well, that doesn't make any sense.

And of course, it doesn't make any sense. That's the mystery of sin, that it doesn't make any sense. And yet, that is what we do. This evening, I want us to explore not all of what that means or all of the reasons why that is, but I want us to learn from a fellow believer who, like us, participated in the Lord's Supper, indeed participated in the First Supper, and having done so, then proceeded that very evening to sin to deny his Lord. We're speaking, of course, of Peter, who we read of in our reading this evening. And I want to consider one question, well, two questions, but the second one only in a very brief and fleeting manner. But the first one that we will dwell on for a little longer is this.

[4 : 39] Why did Peter sin? Why did he fall? Why did he deny his Lord? And I pose that question, and we'll consider what answer we could give to it with the purpose that it would serve as a warning to us, a merciful warning that would help us. It would serve as instruction for us how we might take the warning and perhaps avoid some of the pitfalls that would, at least in a measure, explain to us why it was that Peter disowned his Lord, why Peter denied Jesus, why he sinned in this particular way.

So we ask the question, and we seek to answer it with that purpose, that it would be a practical help to us as Christians, that we would not sin, certainly not with the frequency that we are accustomed to.

I will ask another question and briefly answer it, and that is, why is this sin of Peter recorded? And we'll notice that it is recorded for many reasons, but among others to serve as an encouragement.

So as we think of the reasons why he sinned, that would serve as a warning, as instruction, as helpful instruction, I trust. And as we think of why it is that we have it recorded for us, that that would serve as an encouragement. Let's begin by again posing and beginning to try and answer the question, why did Peter sin?

The first thing that I'd like to suggest in answering that question is that Peter was, certainly in a measure, unprepared for the temptation that was to confront him.

[6 : 23] And in order to notice why it is that we make that suggestion, we need to look beyond the passage that we've read. We need to go backward, backtrack in time, not a great deal, but in a measure, to notice how it is that Peter was indeed unprepared for the temptation. In chapter 26 and in verse 41, one within the passage that speaks of Jesus and indeed the disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane, we find these words directed to Peter and the other disciples. Familiar words for many of us, watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. Why did Peter sin? Why did he deny the Lord? Why did he fail? Well, certainly one of the reasons we might suggest the fundamental reason from which others will flow was that he failed or did not do as he was instructed here. He did not pray. Had he done so, we can be sure that the promise attached would have been experienced. Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. But of course we know that he and the others did not do as they were instructed. Peter knew better in the warfare, if you wish, against temptation.

Peter thought that he had better weapons. We know that just a few moments after being told to watch and pray that you would not fall into temptation, Peter took hold of one of those weapons, literally his sword to fight the forces of evil and darkness. He had better weapons. Jesus said, pray, that's what you need to do. And Peter said, well, prayer, yes, of course that's important, but you know, I've got other ways to serve you. I've got other ways to defend you. I've got other ways to demonstrate my loyalty to you. I have my sword by my side. You tell me to pray, but that is not something I need to do. Peter knew better. And so he was unprepared for the temptation that was to come his way.

And I wonder as we think how that applies to us, is this not the way so often for us also? We maybe can consider, maybe with a measure, I hope, with a measure of sadness, those occasions where we have sinned, where we have fallen in the face of temptation. And we maybe spend some time, I hope we spend time wondering, well, why did that happen? Why was it that I fell? Why was it that I failed to resist the temptation? And maybe we can make the mistake of focusing on the immediate moment of our failure, the immediate circumstances, and trying to analyze and wonder, well, why did that happen?

What could I have done? What could I have done to avoid that? And maybe what we need to do is to just look back a little and recognize that with Peter, the problem really was the lack of preparation.

We weren't prepared for the temptation. And so when it came, we were unable to withstand. I think sometimes we are guilty of abusing or misunderstanding the promise that we have in 1 Corinthians 10 and verse 13. If we just very quickly notice that verse in 1 Corinthians 10 and verse 13, we read, no temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful. He will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. Of course, that is a wonderful promise, but I wonder if sometimes we're guilty of taking that promise and using it or abusing of it in a cavalier way. Well, no temptation is a temptation that I won't be able to withstand. And so I can go wherever I choose to go and live as I choose to live. And when the temptation comes, well, the Lord will be there to help me. And yet we don't prepare for that moment. We don't do what Jesus here said to Peter and the disciples watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. And if we haven't done the groundwork, as it were, if we haven't prepared ourselves for that moment, then we will find that we do fall, that we are unable to withstand. So why did Peter sin? Well, unprepared for the temptation.

[11 : 06] And let us take instruction that we would not make that same mistake. I think if we are honest with ourselves, as I'm sure we want to be, we can relate to this. We know that it's important to pray.

We know that if Jesus says, watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation, that's true. Yes, that's true. It must be true. Jesus says so. It must be true. And yet, with the disciples, is it not the case that often we are slow to pray? We are slow to pay attention to simple instructions that Jesus lovingly grants us. So first of all then, Peter sins, Peter falls, Peter denies his Lord because he was unprepared for the temptation. But I want to suggest also that he sins, he denies his Lord because he found himself, in a sense, distant from the Lord.

We go to the passage that we read in Matthew 26, and if we read there in verse 58. Of course, here what we have is recorded, the events as the gathering make their way to the home of the chief priests. And we read that Peter followed him at a distance, that is, Jesus, as he was being taken.

Right up to the courtyard of the high priest, he entered and sat down with the guards to see the outcome. Well, there we're told, literally, that Peter followed him at a distance. Now, before I say what I'm going to say, I suppose I should qualify it by recognizing that there is a danger of over-spiritualizing what is, after all, simply a description of the events, of how they made their way from A to B. Jesus was being taken to this place where he was going to be tried by the Sanhedrin, and Peter is following him. And we're told, it's described for us, that he followed him at a distance.

But I wonder, and if only as a suggestion, if there isn't significance in the language used, that he followed Jesus at a distance. It's interesting that not only Matthew, but Mark and Luke also, all, perhaps the word highlight would be putting it too strongly, but all record this detail, that Peter followed Jesus at a distance. Might we say, at a safe distance, or certainly what Peter considered to be a safe distance? Well, I would suggest that it certainly was enough distance to contribute to Peter's denial, far enough away to make it that little bit easier.

[14 : 00] If easier is the word to use, when the temptation came to fall, to be unable to withstand, as he is that distance from his Lord. Well, whether that is a legitimate application or not of this description, it certainly is the case that for us there is that importance. If we are to resist temptation, if we are to not fall, if we are to not deny our Lord, then how important for us to walk closely with him. It is certainly the case that the closer our walk, the less we will sin. And so I simply ask myself the question, and I ask you the question also, without laboring it, how close is your walk with the Lord? As I was giving some thought to this, the words of that gospel hymn came to my mind.

Just a closer walk with thee, grant it, Jesus, is my plea. Daily walking close to thee, let it be, dear Lord, let it be. And as I was trying to remember the exact words of the hymn, I did what I suppose we all do nowadays, I googled it. And of course, many well-known singers have sung this hymn. I found just in a few moments, Johnny Cash and Ella Fitzgerald and Bob Dylan and Elvis Presley, to name but a few. And though I'm not here, and I have no desire to be here to judge anybody, it did strike me as interesting how perhaps it's easy to sing the words of the song, and yet our lives to be very different from the words that we sing. And I wonder in this matter of walking a close walk with the Lord, perhaps what we need to do is not so much sing a song, but simply do it. I would go further. In the song, it's presented as a prayer. Daily walking close to thee, let it be, dear Lord, let it be. And so as we sing, we ask Jesus, please help me to walk close to you. I wonder if the response of the Lord is not, I'm here.

I don't need to give that to you. You just have to do it. I'm ready to walk close with you. It's up to you to do the walking close to me. I don't grant that to you. That's not something that you ask for and then wait for me to mystically grant to you. And if it doesn't happen, well, you lament, oh, I'd love to walk closer to Jesus, but it just doesn't seem to be happening. And the Lord says, no, just do it. Just do it.

Well, why did Peter fall? Why did he sin? Why did he deny the Lord? Certainly because he was not adequately prepared, perhaps because he walked and followed Jesus at a distance. But can I also suggest that another reason why Peter fell, why Peter denied the Lord is that he was silent when he could have spoken. In a sense, this is really noting how he begins to fail, how he begins to deny the Lord. And what we have here, of course, is a sense in which the whole matter progresses, and this would illustrate that. What do I mean when I say that he was silent when he could have spoken?

Well, notice there in verses 59 and 60 of our passage, the chief priests and the whole Sanhedrin were looking for false evidence against Jesus so that they could put him to death, but they did not find any, though many false witnesses came forward. Now, before I develop or say what I want to say, there is a prior point that I need to clear up, I suppose. And it's relevant to what I have to say right now and to the immediately following point. And it's really to pose the question, could Peter actually see and hear what was going on in the trial? The accounts that we have in the Gospels, in fairness, don't give us a definitive answer to that. You know, we're told that he's in the courtyard. Now, clearly, the trial doesn't take place in the courtyard. But I think there are reasons for believing that Peter would have been certainly aware of what was going on as it was going on, even if he wasn't able to be physically present. The very nature of the buildings in which he would have been would have allowed for somebody who wasn't in the actual room to know what was going on.

[18:57] Equally, there would have been people coming and going, the very witnesses. And as they came and went, there would be opportunity to ask, well, what's going on? Perhaps more importantly, we have the detail that we are given in Luke's Gospel. When Peter denies Jesus for the third time, we remember well what we're told there, the Lord turned and looked at Peter. So, certainly at that point, of course, this was several hours, so we couldn't deduce from that that throughout the whole time Peter would have been that close. But certainly at that point, they were close enough for Peter to be looked at by Jesus. But if we do take or come to the conclusion that Peter would have been aware of what was going on and could have heard what was going on as Jesus is being tried, then we can validly make this point that he was silent when he could have spoken. You see, this case has been made against Jesus. Witnesses are being called. Accusations are being leveled. And could not Peter have spoken up?

What better witness? Somebody who had accompanied Jesus for all of these years. Presumably, he could have said something, but he chose not to. And I would suggest that this is where his denial begins, what we might call a silent denial. And as we fast forward to ourselves and seek to apply this very briefly, is it not the case that for many of us, this is our favored mode of denial? Maybe not the best turn of phrase to use, but our favored form or mode of denial. Not by what we say, but by what we fail to say, we deny our Lord, our guilty silence. Maybe many of us could say, well, I've never denied Jesus in the manner that Peter denied Jesus. I've never used that kind of language. I've never so vigorously and aggressively denied any association with Jesus. But how often have we, by our silence, been guilty of denying Jesus? But we move on swiftly to notice just a couple of other things. Why did Peter deny

Jesus? Well, I would suggest also, and this also depends on the assumption that Peter was indeed able to see and hear what was going on. And on that assumption, I would say that he failed to see, and he failed to take a God-given opportunity to reflect and to repent and certainly not to proceed into further sin. Notice in our passage in verse 63, as part of the process, the high priest said to him, and we're coming to the conclusion, the high priest said to Jesus, I charge you under oath by the living God, tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God. And Jesus replied, yes, it is as you say.

Now, if we presume or assume that Peter was able to hear that interchange between the high priest and Jesus, is there not a poignancy for Peter with regard to the crucial question posed by Caiaphas with a view to establishing Jesus' guilt? Because in the question that Caiaphas poses, he uses the very language that Peter is so famous for in his confession of Jesus. We return to chapter 16 of Matthew and verses 13 and following. We're familiar with this, but it strikes me that there is a great poignancy about this. When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, who do people say the Son of Man is? They replied, some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and still others, Jeremiah, one of the prophets. But what about you, he asked, who do you say I am?

Simon Peter answered, you are the Christ, the Son of the living God. And he is commended for this by Jesus. And the very words that Peter had declared commendably are the very words that he would hear Caiaphas using to accuse Jesus. And would that not have been an opportunity? God gave an opportunity for Peter to reflect, what am I doing here, denying my Lord? What am I doing here with my guilty silence?

[23 : 44] It wasn't a bad thing that he was there. It's commendable that he was there, unlike the other disciples, or most of them. But was that not an opportunity? I wonder, does the Lord not give us opportunities as we are heading into sin? Maybe we've dipped our toes into sin already, but we're heading very much in the wrong direction, into greater sin. And opportunities are given. A word is spoken, a message is heard, a verse is relayed to us, and there's an opportunity for us to step back and reflect and say, no, no further. To reflect and to repent. But then finally, as we consider why Peter failed, why he denied his Lord, well, once on the slippery slope that we've already really been suggesting he is on, once on the slippery slope he keeps on sliding. And there, of course, we think of the manner in which he denies Jesus three times, and we're not going to consider that in any detail, but we do notice this progression that there is in Peter's denial. There's the silent denial that we've already touched on. And then in his first denial to the young girl, we could call it an evasive denial.

It's not an outright denial, it's evasive. You know, there in verse 70, I don't know what you're talking about. But then it moves on, it progresses to outright denial. Then in verse 72, I don't know the man. And then it goes deeper, and he plunges deeper to foul-mouthed outright denial. Then in verse 74, then he began to call down curses on himself, and he swore to them, I don't know the man.

And is this not what sin is like? Is there not in sin that characteristic of a progression begins gently? Begins in what we consider to be a small way, an innocuous way, not so bad. But then it grows, and it develops, and it gets worse. We don't even realize that it's getting worse, but it is.

And so let us be careful. Let us take the warning that this passage affords to us. As we do go into the week that lies ahead, let us watch and pray so that we will not fall into temptation.

I draw things to a close by simply highlighting that the very fact that this sin is recorded for us serves certainly as instruction, as I hope it has done thus far. I think it also serves as an encouragement. We, like Peter, we're all fallible. We all fall. We all fail our Lord. And certainly, that encouragement is not to be a pretext for further denial or for further sin, but it is an encouragement when we do fall that we're not alone. Peter fell, and we will fall. But also an encouragement to be honest, you know, the very fact that it's recorded for us. Who would have been the source of all of this? Well, presumably Peter. Who else? Who else could have been the source for this detail of what happened? Peter himself recognizes his failure, recognizes how he failed as Lord, and is willing to record it, and that it would be for us a warning and an instruction, but an encouragement also that we can all be forgiven and restored. We know that this is not the end of the story. We know how in John's gospel it is recorded for us, how there is that very moving occasion when Jesus restores Peter. He's forgiven and restored. So it is for us. Indeed, for those of us who have failed our Lord, maybe in many ways, maybe some of us are conscious of a particular way in which we have failed our Lord. Well, may the Lord's table this evening be a table of forgiveness, a table of restoration for us. Let us pray.