

The Denier

In the name of him who washed the feet of his disciples, dear friends in Christ: For this year's Lenten meditations, we're studying some of the main characters in the story of our Lord's passion and death. Last week we began with sad account of Judas, who betrayed Jesus. We saw that his was a simple case of idolatry. On one level he was trying to be a faithful disciple. He did believe in Jesus, that he was the Son of God and the promised Christ; but at the same time Judas had made a god of money. It's what he loved and trusted. It's what he craved – so much so that he was pilfering from the funds that were given to support the ministry of Jesus. In the end he proved what Jesus said: "A man cannot serve two masters ... You cannot serve both God and mammon." Judas chose to serve the latter, and thus ultimately he did not so much betray Jesus as he betrayed himself.

This evening we turn our attention to Simon Peter who – during the passion, at least – is best remembered for denying Jesus. And what we're going to discover is that Peter denied Jesus precisely because he refused to deny himself.

But let's back up and get the bigger picture. We can do that with Peter because the Scriptures give us much more information about him. Where Judas and some of the others lurk in the background with little or nothing to say, Peter is almost always in the forefront – sometimes offering comments that are quite literally inspired, and at other times showcasing the old adage that it's better to be silent and have everyone think you're a fool than to open your mouth and prove it.

Peter lived in Capernaum on the northeastern shore of the Sea of Galilee. There he ran a fishing business with his brother Andrew, and their partners James and John, the sons of Zebedee. From this we can infer that he was used to being in charge. He probably had a crew of four to eight men on the boat he captained. He was also used to managing things: training and looking out for his employees, keeping the boat and equipment in good repair, watching the markets, staying ahead of the competition – in short, a real entrepreneur, a self made man. We know too that he was married, and though they are not mentioned, it's a safe bet that he had children. He was enjoying a full, hardworking, happy, and successful life – and almost certainly never imagined leaving it to become a full time minister and evangelist for the Lord Jesus.

That's not to say he wasn't religious. He was. He was a practicing Jew; not a fanatic legalist like the Pharisees, nor theological liberal like the Sadducees who imported ideas from Greek philosophy into their faith because, they thought, it made them sound more refined and scholarly. No, Peter's faith would have been the simple, straight forward belief and practice of the common man. He trusted Moses and the prophets, he tried to keep kosher, and he looked forward to the coming of the Messiah and the restoration of the kingdom of Israel.

But there was something missing in Peter's religious life. The faith of the common Jew in his day tended to be rather surface level and mechanical: "Keep the Sabbath, don't eat pork, attend synagogue, avoid Gentiles, do this, don't do that – and then you're a good Jew." The trouble is that on the inside, you know that you're not good. No doubt Peter got angry at times and cursed his crew, he fought with his wife over silly things, he felt envy and lust and greed, he'd go out drinking with the boys – maybe have a few too many sometimes, and he'd tell inappropriate stories and laugh at others he heard. He knew all the useful less-than-honest

business tricks, like how to hide less desirable fish under the good ones when selling to a fishmonger, or passing off unsold portions of yesterday's catch as today's. And if you're wondering how I know this, it's not because I read it Scripture. It's because Peter was typical guy. That and he was one of many who responded to call of John the Baptist to repent and to be baptized in the Jordan. The Baptist must have made an impression on him too, because Peter was one of those who stayed on for some time to be disciplined by John. And from the Baptist, Peter learned how to be a better man and a more faithful Jew, and how to do the good works that are the fruits of repentance.

It's while staying with John the Baptist that Peter first met Jesus. It was shortly after the Lord returned from his forty days of fasting and temptation in the desert. John pointed him out to some who were with him and said, "Look, there's the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." One of those who heard was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. He went and told Peter, "We have found the Christ." Together they spent an afternoon hearing Jesus teach. And that convinced them that he was the real deal. So the next day when Jesus departed for Galilee, they went with him.

But they did not become disciples of Jesus right away. The Lord was just beginning his ministry – just starting to build a reputation as a teacher of God's Word. He'd go from town to town teaching in the synagogues by himself. Meanwhile Peter and the others stayed in Capernaum and returned to their fishing business. It was only when Jesus happened to be in town that Peter would hear Jesus speak. And no doubt throughout this time Peter was applying what he learned from John the Baptist. He was trying to be a better and more faithful man. I'm sure that outwardly he did make improvements. People were probably amazed at how much he'd changed. But on the inside, Peter found that he was just as much a sinner as he was before.

This is evident from what happened on the day that Jesus *did* call Peter to be a disciple. You may remember that Jesus more or less commandeered Peter's boat to use as a preaching platform. It was in the morning after Peter had spent a long, frustrating night on the lake catching exactly nothing. It couldn't have made Peter very happy – he was tired and wanted to go home; but what are you going to do? Tell Jesus, the Christ of God, no? After the teaching time, which lasted several hours, Jesus told Peter to take the boat out into the lake and cast the nets. It was all wrong: wrong time of day, wrong place to catch fish. But, biting his lip, Peter complied; thinking the whole operation was a useless waste of time and effort. Well, you know what happened. The nets were immediately overflowing with fish. Nearly sank the boat. And Peter in shame and astonishment fell down before Jesus and said, "Depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man."

Despite his best effort to change and be good, Peter knew that he'd failed. He couldn't imagine that Jesus would want someone like him for a disciple. He didn't yet understand that recognizing your sinfulness and your need for a Savior is the first requirement of being a disciple of Jesus. He still thought that the faith was all about self improvement. And so when Jesus said, "Follow me. From now on you'll be catching men", Peter resolved to try even harder to be worthy of the call Jesus gave him.

And for a while it must have worked – worked so well that Peter even managed to fool himself. They were heady days, after all: going with Jesus from place to place, hearing him teach, and watching him perform amazing miracles – all the while learning, growing, becoming more and more convinced that the kingdom of God was being restored: a kingdom of the strong, the faithful, the good – those who love God's Word and keep it. And Peter was one of them –

perhaps even the best of them, which is why whenever the discussion among the disciples turned to which of them was the greatest, Peter could thump his chest and say, "It's got to be me."

He was, after all, the one who walked with Jesus on the water, wasn't he? (Never mind that bit when he sank and had to call for help.) He was one of the three who saw the Lord transfigured on the mountain. Glorious, that vision. And when Jesus asked his disciples, "Who do you say that I am?" Peter was the one who replied, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Jesus congratulated him for that. He said, "Blessed are you, Simon, Son of Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you; but my Father in heaven. And I say to you that you are Peter, a stone, and upon this Rock I will build my church." He didn't say that to the other disciples, did he?

Peter became the consummate theologian of glory. He fell hook, line, and sinker for the widely accepted lie that the sin in man can be defeated with hard work and good intentions; that God rewards the good, the faithful, and those striving to overcome; and that Jesus is for us a leader, a guide, a teacher, and an example to help *you* bring glory to God by making yourself better. Nor was he alone in this. All the disciples thought this way; but Peter is the one who more than the others personifies it. He's the one who gives that wrong-headed way of thinking a voice.

And that's why he's the one who speaks against the truth. When Jesus explains that he must go to Jerusalem and there be rejected and killed, Peter is the one who says, "No, Lord, that will never happen to you!" When Jesus is washing the disciples' feet, Peter is the one who says, "No, Lord, you'll never wash *my* feet!" When Jesus says, "This night you will all be offended on account of me", Peter is the one who replies, "Though all the others be offended, *I* never will. I'll go with you to prison and to death!"

What Peter is saying is, "See, you made the right choice in me. I'm good now. I'm loyal. I'm your man. You can count on me, Jesus. I'll prove it to you." And he tried (rather vainly) when he attempted to take on the soldiers who were arresting Jesus. Of course, all he managed to do was to cut off one of their ears. And then, like the rest, he abandoned Jesus and he ran. Still trying to maintain some semblance of his dignity, he followed at a safe distance; but then, having come too close to danger, he slumps to mush before a housemaid who questioned him. Not once, but three times. But something worth pointing out is that when Peter denied knowing Jesus, he was in part telling the truth. He did not know the man. He knew Jesus as the mighty Lord, perhaps; but not as the suffering Savior. Nor prior to this did Peter really know himself. He had no idea how weak, fearful, and helpless he was at heart. But Jesus did. And when Peter realized that Jesus knew who he was at heart, and chose him as a disciple anyway, he began to understand for the first time the infinite love of God who shows mercy and forgiveness in Christ Jesus to poor, weak, miserable sinners like himself.

This caused Peter to weep genuine tears of contrition and remorse. You'll remember that Judas also was sorry. But he made the mistake of thinking that returning the money would solve the problem and make up for his sin. Peter knew that he couldn't. He knew at last that he was nothing and that he had nothing in himself. But what he did have was the word of Jesus: "When you are restored, strengthen your brothers." It told him that Jesus foresaw all this and had already planned to save, forgive, and restore him. That's what he clung to.

And that's what we need to cling to also. Second to the sin of making a god of money or any other material thing, is making a god of ourselves. It happens when we imagine that we

can overcome and defeat the sin in ourselves and somehow make ourselves worthy of the love of God. It's the most common mistake made in modern American Evangelicalism. And when we think that way, we don't need a Savior to die for us – after all, we're capable of saving ourselves. Or, to say it another way, because we refuse to deny ourselves and our abilities, we end up denying Jesus – just like Peter did.

Therefore may we learn from his mistake never to be ashamed of Jesus who served us by suffering and dying on the cross, and rather to be deeply ashamed of ourselves and our sin; that with contrite hearts and true repentance we may cling to him who has promised always to forgive and restore us. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!