

**Grace That Is Greater**  
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**Sermon**

Congregation of Jesus Christ,

When William Shakespeare wanted to communicate the ultimate pain experienced by Julius Caesar in his death, he set the stage by having a band of conspirators confront the emperor on the steps of the capitol. After a brief exchange of words, they plunge their daggers into Caesar and kill him. But just before he dies, Caesar looks into the eyes of his beloved friend, Brutus, and utters the words, "Et tu, Brute? — Even you, Brutus? Then die, Caesar." It's a climactic moment, and in that moment Shakespeare would have us come to understand that the betrayal of a trusted friend can hurt far more than the wound of a conspirator's knife.

More recently, Michael Card also captured something of this in his song "Why?"

He wrote, "Only a friend can betray a friend..." and that's true. Only someone close; only someone who's truly trusted can really betray, and that's why betrayal hurts us at a level deeper than any other pain that we might feel.

I'm sure that anyone here who has ever experienced it would agree. And certainly, we also see this demonstrated in the story of Jesus' last days. To begin with, when the mob came to take him away to be crucified, it was led by one of his trusted companions. Judas, one of the twelve, who had been with him almost from the beginning.

Then, when it was evident that Jesus would be taken captive, the other eleven also deserted him and fled. And later, when Peter, one of Jesus' closest friends, found himself sitting with a group of people who had gathered together to await word of Jesus' fate, Luke tells us: "A servant girl saw him seated there in the firelight. She looked closely at him and said, 'This man was with him.' But he denied it. 'Woman, I don't know him,' he said. A little later someone else saw him and said, 'You also are one of them.' 'Man, I am not!' Peter replied. About an hour later another asserted, 'Certainly this fellow was with him, for he is a Galilean.' Peter replied, 'Man, I don't know what you're talking about!' Just as he was speaking, the rooster crowed." (Luke 22:54-60)

And this gives us another interesting glimpse at the pain of betrayal, because if there's anything worse than being betrayed by a close friend, it is actually being the betrayer and having to come face to face with the pain that we have caused another person. In a way, the betrayer is ultimately betrayed by his own actions.

Whatever may have motivated him, when he realizes just what he's done, it turns back on him and he feels some of the very same pain that he's inflicted. We know that Judas, when he realized what he had done went out and hanged himself, because he couldn't deal with the guilt. But Peter also learned the same lesson that night, because Luke goes on to say that after his third denial, in that very moment, The Lord turned and looked straight at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word the Lord had spoken to him: "Before the rooster crows today, you will disown me three times." And he went outside and wept bitterly. (Luke 22:61–62)

And it's no wonder that he reacted so strongly, because of all of the disciples, Peter had been the most outspoken about his devotion to the Lord. There had been a moment, just a few hours before, when Jesus told them, "This very night you will all fall away on account of me, for it is written: 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.' But after I have risen, I will go ahead of you into Galilee."

But Peter didn't like the sound of that. It implied that maybe the disciples were a little lacking in the courage department. And while Peter couldn't speak for the rest of them, he was sure that personally, that was not the case. He was ready to take a stand with Jesus, even to go down in a blaze of glory, if that's what it took to be faithful.

So Peter was evidently more than a little offended by Jesus' remark, and he felt compelled to speak up in his own defense. He replied, "Even if all fall away on account of you, I never will." Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, this very night, before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times."

Now watch what happens next, because it sets the stage for us to understand the little interchange between Jesus and Peter in the text that we've already read. You see even though Jesus has forcefully declared that Peter will deny him, Peter refuses to believe. Whatever the others might do, Peter would not deny Jesus. He would never fall away. He went so far as to say, "Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you." (Mat 26:31–35)

But the truth is, Peter denied Jesus four times that night. Later, as we've seen, he would deny knowing Jesus under pressure from others in the dim firelight of a Jerusalem court. But right here, under pressure from his pride, he denies Jesus' own word, implying that in spite of what the Christ, the Son of the Living God might say, he knew better.

And I imagine that Jesus, knowing exactly what the night would bring forth must have felt the first pangs of betrayal right then and there. But it would only get worse. Later that evening, he would go out to Gethsemane to pray, hoping and expecting that his disciples would at least support him in that. But each time he went off by himself and came back, he found that the disciples had fallen asleep. And then came the moment when the mob approached and Judas stepped forward to identify Jesus to the soldiers with a kiss.

It was sometime, right about then that Peter decided to make good on his promise. Having a sword strapped to his thigh, he drew it out and took a swing at Malchus, the servant of the high priest, cutting off his ear. He probably thought that he was being true to his word here. He probably thought he was taking a stand with Jesus just like he had promised to do. But then Jesus rebuked him. "Put your sword back in its place," [He] said to him, "for all who draw the sword will die by the sword." (Matthew 26:52)

And as Jesus healed the man that Peter had wounded, it finally dawned on that proud fisherman that to stand with Jesus that night wouldn't mean fighting for him; it would mean dying with him; and Peter's courage failed and he ran away like all the rest. So in a very real sense, it was Peter's *pride* which led directly to Peter's downfall. Because, after he ran away, Peter came back, but not all the way back. He turns up a little later following from a distance. But evidently, it wasn't enough of a distance, because it seems Peter can hardly turn around without someone accusing him of having been a disciple of Jesus. And clearly there was no percentage in that, so each time that he's confronted, Peter simply denies. By the third time, not only denying, but cursing and swearing that he's never even heard of this man Jesus; he doesn't know him at all.

But Jesus himself is somewhere nearby as Peter utters that third and final denial and it's at that very instant as the rooster crows to welcome the dawn, Luke tells us, "The Lord turned and looked straight at Peter."

It was one of those moments when the mind takes a snapshot and files it away for future reference and recrimination. And I'm sure that Peter fully expected to be living that moment for the rest of his life. But not because there was anger in that look or wrath or even a sense of "I told you so." There was an overwhelming weariness and physical pain stamped on the face of Jesus in that moment, but, worse still, there was the pain of betrayal; the hurt of being denied by a close friend who only wants to save his own skin.

And in that look, Peter must have felt a world of guilt descend on his shoulders. He had betrayed the Lord, just as surely as Judas. He had let Jesus down. He had turned his back on his closest friend at the very moment when that friend most needed his support. And so again Peter runs away and he breaks down, weeping bitterly, feeling in his own heart the very pain that he had caused to Jesus. He probably felt that he could never be forgiven. He probably felt that no one could ever be forgiven for a sin as great as his.

And what sin could be greater than to deny the Lord?

But really, isn't all sin essentially a denial of Jesus? Whatever we may do in terms of actual deeds, isn't the root of all sin a rejection and a denial of God's grace in Christ Jesus?

It's true. And I believe that if we could somehow see the face of Jesus just as Peter saw it, in the very moment that we choose to turn our backs on him, to deny his grace, and to go our own way, then we'd feel exactly as Peter did. If we could really grasp the hurt and the pain that our sins caused to Jesus, then it would have a profound impact on the choices that we make every day. Try to think of it the next time that you're tempted. Try to imagine Jesus looking right at you, just the way he looked at Peter, with all the physical, spiritual, and emotional agony of the cross mirrored there in his eyes.

Because Jesus died for those sins that we so easily commit. That little illicit pleasure that we just can't do without, cost the Son of God his life. That little lie, that little juicy tidbit of gossip, that secret anger that we nurture way down deep where no one can see; that lustful look, that covetous heart; whatever it may be, it cost Jesus his life. And when we flirt with temptation, we're really denying that very simple, basic fact. We're denying Jesus all over again, and if we could somehow get our heads around that fact, right at the point of temptation, then maybe

we'd have a different attitude about sin in our daily lives. But thank God, that's not the end of the story, because while we may feel guilt when, like Peter, we stop to contemplate what we have done, God's grace is greater than all our sin.

And that's my reason for telling you this story. That's the point that I want you to take with you when you go home today. We're not sinners in the hands of an angry God anymore. Jesus died for our sins and rose again for our justification, so now, we're saints in the hands of a gracious God. And if you fast forward the story of Peter over to John, chapter 21, that's exactly what you'll see.

Peter and the boys are gone fishin' for the day, but Jesus seeks them out, walking along the shore of the lake just like he had done a few years before. And I'm not going to retell the whole story; we read it together earlier. But there comes a point when Peter once again finds himself face to face with Jesus, there in the sunshine by the Sea of Galilee.

And Peter has already acknowledged the resurrection. He believes that Jesus has conquered death and brought salvation; but there's still this thing between them. That look, and the understanding — the guilt that came with it. It may even be the case that Peter is back in the boat because he feels like he can't be of much use to Jesus after this thing that he has done. But once again, Jesus looks him right in the eye and this time he asks him a simple question. "Simon son of John, do you truly love me more than these?"

Now much has been made of the two different words translated "love" that are used in this dialogue, and even the expression "more than these," sometimes gets brought into question. But I believe that taken in context of what we've already considered this morning, the exchange is really fairly simple. Peter had boldly proclaimed, "Lord, even if everyone else deserts you, I never will," but then he had not only deserted Jesus, he had also denied him three times. And in this exchange, Jesus takes him back to that previous declaration. In essence, he's really saying, "Peter, do you still think that you love me more than the rest of the disciples? Do you really love me the way that I love you? Enough to give your life for me?"

And the old Peter, the proud impetuous Peter is gone. He was cut down with that look on the day of the crucifixion. So he answers simply, "Lord, you know that I love you. You know that I think of you as a brother and a friend" And Jesus did know that. Of course, that's not the only thing Jesus knew about Peter; he knew Peter's weaknesses. He knew Peter's failures. He knew Peter's sin. But he died for all of it, so none of that matters in this moment. Just this, "Peter, do you really love me?" And again, the big fisherman answers, "Lord, you know, you know that I do."

And then a third time, one time for each and every time that Peter had denied him, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" And the Bible tells us that Peter was hurt at this point because Jesus asked him the third time, "Do you love me? Do you really care for me as a brother and a friend?" No doubt Peter was hurt. He's just been reminded of a less than shining moment in his relationship with the Lord, and he responds out of the weight of guilt that still lies on his back. He responds out of his pain, "Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you."

But this exchange isn't about guilt, not at all. It's about grace. It's about grace that's great enough to encompass all of our sins and take them out of the way. It's about grace that's great

enough to take broken, feeble sinners and make them into beloved children. It's about grace that's great enough to take a prideful fisherman and humble him to the point of true greatness in service to Christ. It's about grace that is greater than all our sin.

Because each time that Peter responded, "Lord, you know that I love you," Jesus came right back with a command. "Feed my lambs...take care of my sheep...feed my sheep." And what he's really saying there is, "Peter, we both know what you've done, and we both know how you feel about it. But that's in the past now. It's done, it's forgotten. I died for all that. Now put it behind you, take hold of my grace and get busy with the work that I've called you to do." And Peter did.

You see it in the sermon he preached a short time later on the day of Pentecost. You see it in the letters that he wrote to the church of his day, rejoicing that he was counted worthy not only to serve but even to suffer for his Lord. You see it in the life that he lived and you see it in the death that he died. God's grace was greater than all his sin. And it's greater than all of our sin too.

It doesn't matter what we've done, or what we've failed to do. It doesn't even matter if at the moment of crisis we caved in completely. Peter did, but by the grace of God he was not only restored to the family, he was given a place of leadership where he could serve Christ effectively for many years after.

Have we betrayed Jesus? Have we lived in a way that denies his presence and power in our lives? It doesn't matter a bit. Whatever we've done, Jesus died for that too. It's gone. It's forgotten. It's paid for completely, and we're called in Christ Jesus to leave it behind, to take hold of his grace and to follow him.

So the real question is not, "How have you offended?" The real question for each of us today is the same one Jesus asked Peter all those centuries ago beside the Sea of Galilee. "Do you truly love me?"

And like Peter, we can't answer that question in light of the sins that we've committed. We have to answer that question in the bright, shining light of God's amazing grace. Because in his grace we can truly love him. In his grace we can truly serve him. And in his grace he calls each one of us, just as he called Peter, "Follow me." Because God's grace is greater than all our sin.

Amen.>