

I Don't Know This Man!

<i>Text</i>	Mark 14:27-31,53-54,66-72
<i>Readings</i>	Zechariah 12:10-13:9; 1 Peter 5; Mark 8:31-38
<i>Theme</i>	Three times Peter denied that he knew Jesus, as Jesus had predicted.
<i>Purpose</i>	To warn us against the temptation to deny Jesus and to assure us of his forgiveness if we do sin and sincerely repent.

Probably most of us can remember an occasion when we said something really stupid, when we really put our foot in our mouth, and immediately regretted what we had said. Even as we think back to that we feel ashamed of what we said.

Again, probably most of us can remember when we promised to do something for someone else and assured that person that we would remember, but we forgot.

The passage we have read describes Peter doing both of these things – promising to do something that he didn't do, and saying things he later deeply regretted.

Peter himself told Mark about what had happened, and Mark wrote it down for the benefit of those reading this gospel – first for the Christians in Rome and later for all of us – so that we might learn from this and avoid falling into the same sin.

Context: On the Thursday evening before his death Jesus had celebrated his last Passover meal with his disciples. Late that night they left that upper room in Jerusalem and went out to the Mount of Olives. Either on the way or at the Garden of Gethsemane Jesus predicted that they would all desert him. Verse 27: "You will all fall away," Jesus told them, "for it is written: "I will strike the shepherd and the sheep will be scattered." (Zechariah 13:7)

Jesus quoted the prophet Zechariah who spoke to Israel after they had returned from the Babylonian exile. His words were fulfilled during the 500 years leading up to the coming of Christ, especially during the reign of an evil king named Antiochus who killed many of the Jewish leaders. As a result the people of Israel were troubled and scattered.

But the ultimate reference is to the death of the Lord Jesus who is the chief shepherd. Jesus predicted that when he was arrested and taken prisoner all of them would fall away.

Yet he also promised a restoration (verse 28); "But after I have risen, I will go ahead of you into Galilee." He not only declared that he would rise but also that he would be their leader, and he gave them the specific promise that he would meet them in Galilee where he had spent much of his ministry. Later on

we'll see how important this was, but at the time the disciples completely missed this promise. They were too busy defending themselves against this prediction.

Peter, as usual, was especially forthright (verse 29); "Even if all fall away, I will not."

In the days of the Stuarts in England there were many troubles and conflicts. In one of those the Covenanters captured the Marquis of Huntly. They told him to abandon his loyalty to Charles I. They pointed to the block and axe and told him that unless he renounced his loyalty to the king he would be executed then and there. He replied; "You can take my head from my shoulders, but you can never take my heart from my king."

This is what Peter declared about his loyalty to Jesus. But he over-estimated his faith and courage. He did not follow the counsel of James who urged his readers to be quick to listen and slow to speak (James 1:19). Peter did not listen to his Lord carefully enough, and he was too quick to speak, and promised more than he could deliver. He spoke sincerely, but sincerity by itself is not enough. He had a false confidence in his own strength and he made a foolish boast.

Jesus responded by warning him again (verse 30); "I tell you the truth, today – yes, tonight – before the rooster crows twice you yourself will disown me three times."

He emphasised this to Peter; "I tell you the truth..." or "Truly, I tell you..."

He was not speaking about the distant future but about this day, even this night.

And out of all the disciples he singled him out – "you yourself".

Jesus knew his loud and bold statement of loyalty would not guarantee faithfulness.

But Peter was insistent that this would never happen and he expressed himself very strongly. The Greek word can be translated as emphatically, insistently or exceedingly. He said (verse 31); "Even if I have to die with you I will never disown you." He was not alone in claiming this; all the disciples said the same; they all agreed with him.

Calvin warns us; "Nothing falls faster or vanishes sooner than zeal which is inconsiderate." Yes, it is great to have zeal and to be enthusiastic. But it needs to be carefully considered, soundly based and well thought through. If it is not it will vanish the moment difficulties arise.

All this is recorded as a lesson for us.

On the one hand we don't want to be overcome by fear and anxiety – then we won't do anything.

On the other hand we don't want to be overconfident. We are fighting powerful spiritual enemies and we are small and weak. Our confidence does not lie in our own strength but in the Lord and his might.

Many years later, out of his own experience, Peter wrote; "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble. Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time." (1 Peter 5:5-6)

The apostle Paul warns us; "if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!" (1 Cor 10:12)

Regularly we need to pray the prayer of David;

"Search me O God and know my heart;
test me and know my anxious thoughts.
See if there is any offensive may in me,
And lead me in the way everlasting."
(Psalm, 139:23f)

Instead of being proud of our own strength we need to recognize our own weakness and rely on God. Our confidence is in him, not in ourselves.

Later that evening Jesus was arrested and taken to the house of Caiaphas for a trial before the Sanhedrin.

Peter had followed along behind, at some distance so as not to be noticed, and had gone right into the courtyard of the house. John was also there. (John 18:15f) All the other disciples had scattered, as Jesus had predicted.

[The first denial] It was a cold night and Peter joined the men gathered around a fire keeping warm. The light from the fire lit up their faces and one of the servant girls of the High Priest looked closely at Peter in the firelight and said (verse 67b); "You also were with that Nazarene, Jesus." Perhaps she had seen Peter with Jesus in the temple a few days earlier. There was contempt in her tone; "...that Nazarene, Jesus."

"But he denied it. 'I don't know or understand what you are talking about.'" (Verse 68)

Calvin comments; "it does not take a heavy fight to break a man, nor many forces or devices. Whoever is not dependant on God's hand will soon fall, at a breath of wind or the noise of a falling leaf." At the accusation of a slave girl Peter denied his Lord. Danger was far away but he panicked and denied any association with Jesus.

[The second denial] He now felt uncomfortable by the fire, but he did not want to leave the courtyard, so he moved to the entranceway, or the gateway leading out to the street, where it was darker. Later on, however, the same servant girl saw him there and she said to those standing around, "This fellow is one of them." (Verse 69)

Again he denied this. When you have denied Christ once it is hard to go back and begin again. One lie will usually lead to more lies. One small sin will usually lead to greater sins. This certainly happened to Peter and it often happens to us.

[The third denial] The words of the servant girl had made the men in the gateway more suspicious of Peter and caused them to take more notice of him. Vs 70: "After a little while, those standing near said to Peter, 'Surely you are one of them, for you are a Galilean.'" (Verse 70b)

In response Peter began to curse and swear. He called down curses on himself if he did know Christ, and on those present if they insisted on this point. The first two times he had denied any association with Jesus; this time he denied Jesus himself; "I don't know this man you are talking about." (Verse 71)

Sometimes people want to excuse Peter's sin. They point out that at least he was one of the two disciples who followed Jesus into the courtyard. At least he was there and he didn't run away immediately.

And better to be "a Peter with a flaming heart of love, even if that love did for a moment fail and fail most shamefully, than a Judas with a cold heart of hate." (Barclay) These comments are true.

But we should not underestimate his sin.

Jesus had warned; "If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels." (Mark 8:38)

Peter was ashamed of Jesus. He denied even knowing him. He reinforced this with curses and oaths. All this after insisting that he would never do this.

Let's not minimize this. One commentator notes; "Light thoughts on sin ultimately lead to light thoughts on redemption, and rob the cross of its glory." (Cole, IVP)

Peter himself did not underestimate what he had done. He explained his sin to Mark in all its painful detail. And Mark wrote it all down and sent it to the church in Rome. He wanted them to read about the suffering and death of Jesus and about Peter's denial of his Lord because they were facing persecution. They were under pressure to deny their Lord.

This was written down to warn them. If Peter, one of the leading disciples could deny Jesus, it could also happen to them.

And it could happen to us.

We need to watch and pray that we will not fall into temptation. We need to be on our guard against sin.

We need to remember the words of Jesus about not denying him and the eternal consequences that could have.

And we need to consider the effect that might have on others. If we deny Jesus in front of other Christians who are weak they will be discouraged by our poor example. And if we deny Jesus before his enemies they will mock him and ridicule him and us.

Those of us in positions of teaching and leadership in the church need to be especially aware of this; for any of us to deny Jesus will have a bad effect on the church and do much harm to other Christians; it would be a poor witness to Christians and to non Christians.

Peter's denial, however, is not the end of the story. Immediately after his third denial the rooster crowed the second time. "Then Peter remembered the word Jesus had spoken to him.... And he broke down and wept." (verse 72)

Tears by themselves do not indicate genuine repentance. Some people have "crocodile tears", tears just for show or for effect. But from the rest of the New Testament we know that Peter repented thoroughly and completely. There was genuine sorrow over sin.

And after repentance came forgiveness and restoration. Jesus anticipated that when he told the disciples that after he had risen he would go ahead of them into Galilee. (vs 28)

The angels at the empty tomb reminded the women of his words and told them to go and tell the disciples, and Peter. Peter gets special mention. Jesus knew that he would need to hear this good news that he had risen. And he would need the assurance that Jesus had accepted him and forgiven him.

This too was written down for us. We need the warning to guard against sin and not deny our Lord, but we also need the comfort of knowing that when we do sin Jesus forgives us. No matter how far we fall the Lord is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in mercy. If you confess your sins he will forgive you and cleanse you.

This is illustrated in the life of a preacher and evangelist named Brownlow North. In his youth he had lived a wild life. One Sunday he was to preach in Aberdeen, in Scotland. Before he went to the pulpit a letter was handed to him. The letter recalled a shameful incident in his life before he became a Christian and stated that if he dared to preach the writer would get up in church and announce what he had done. The preacher took the letter to the pulpit and read it to the congregation. He told them it was perfectly true. But he also told them that Jesus had forgiven him; that if anyone is in Christ he is a new creation, the old has gone, the new has come. (2 Corinthians 5:17)

Peter knew that too.

You can know this as well.

If you believe in Jesus God will forgive you all your sins, no matter how bad they are, and he will “himself restore you, and make you strong, firm and steadfast.” (1 Peter 5:10-11)

Amen