

The Faithfulness of Christ and the Cowardice of Peter

Mark 14:53-72

Justin Deeter – November 5, 2017



As we pick back up the Gospel of Mark, we arrive right at the start of the passion of Christ. In the Gospel of Mark, we've seen Jesus arrive heralding the kingdom of God. Through Jesus' ministry he's proclaimed the power of the Gospel and have attested to the power of his kingdom by signs and miracles. However, the religious leaders hated Jesus because he threatened their control and power. Meanwhile, as his disciples slowly begin to perceive his true identity, Jesus begins to tell them that he must suffer, die, and rise again. All the while, Jesus has been keeping his true identity as the Christ, the messiah of Israel, concealed. The time had not yet come to reveal his true identity publicly. Yet, as Jesus turns towards Jerusalem in celebration of the passover, he knows he enters into his final week. The time to accomplish his mission has now arrived. Jesus lays down the gauntlet to the religious leaders as he enters into the city of Jerusalem with messianic overtones. As the bold reformer of Israel, he overtones the tables in the temple gates rebuking the hypocritical religious practices of Israel. In his last week, he engaged in a series of public debates with the religious leaders. The tension between Jesus and the religious leaders grew and were soon about to rupture.

Meanwhile, Jesus gathered his disciples in the upper room to take of the Passover meal together. At the meal, Jesus takes the bread and the cup and tells them that these reference his body that was to be broken and his blood which was to be poured out. As one of his own disciples, Judas Iscariot departs from the upper room to go betray Jesus, Jesus goes to the garden of

Gethsemane to pray. He knows the hour has now come. As Judas betrays Jesus with a kiss, the events of the cross are set in motion. Last time we were in the Gospel of Mark, the religious leaders arrested Jesus and the disciples scattered in fear.

As Jesus' trial commences, Mark contrasts the faithfulness of Christ with the cowardice of Peter. Remember, that the apostle Peter is Mark's source for the events in his gospel. On the one hand, we see Christ the steadfast rock who stares down his enemy with confidence and defends the truth in faithfulness. On the other hand, we see Peter, the rock upon which Christ will build his church, deny Jesus three different times in cowardice and failure. In this contrast we see Jesus is silent in the face of his accusers, Peter is vocal in his denial of Jesus. Jesus endures his suffering with courage, Peter avoids suffering with denial. Jesus is steadfast before his enemies, Peter wobbles away in fear.

As we contrast Jesus and Peter in the passage before us we will learn this important truth this morning: Jesus is faithful despite our unfaithfulness to him. Like Peter, we have denied Christ, rejected Christ, and abandoned Christ. Yet, even though we are so often unfaithful to Jesus, Jesus was faithful for us.

The Faithfulness of Christ (v. 53-65)

After Jesus was arrested in Gethsemane, he was taken through Jerusalem to the home of the former high priest, Annas (John 18:13). Afterwards, they took Jesus to the home of the current high priest, Caiaphas (Matthew 26:57). Caiaphas was a powerful high priest who served for nineteen years, well above the average of a four year term. The name "Caiaphas" meant "inquisitor." By now, it was well after midnight. There the religious leaders called an emergency council of the Sanhedrin in the middle of the night at the house of Caiaphas. As the seventy members of this council assembled, they gathered with one purpose, to kill Jesus. Caiaphas the high priest would lead the inquisition against Jesus.

The impromptu court session at midnight had all the dressings of legitimacy, but was in fact an illegal gathering. The whole trial was a sham. According to the council's own rules, they were not to make judgements at night, nor were they to conduct business outside of their chambers at the temple, nor were they to handle a capital offense case during the celebration of Passover. The whole council that night was a judicial charade, an illegal witch hunt.

As this pseudo-council assembles, we see that Peter has followed them at a distance, and had infiltrated the courtyard of the high priest. Peter had scattered with the rest of the disciples, but here we see he's the only one who shows back up. Perhaps he meant what he said, that he would go to Jesus to his death if necessary? Back in Mark 14:31, Peter insisted, even after Jesus predicted his denial that "If I must die with you, I will not deny you." Peter, at great risk to himself, actually shows up to watch what happens at this council. Mark makes it clear, that Peter exposes himself as his face is illuminated as he warms himself by the fire sitting with the guards.

As the trial commences, the council begins to try to coordinate witnesses so that they can have just grounds to execute Jesus. According to the Law, any death sentence required a capital offense authenticated by two witnesses. The council tried to manipulate the witnesses convincing them to lie and bear false witness of Jesus in order to get the guilty verdict. The charge they conspired to bring against Jesus was something he said early in his ministry where someone heard him say, "I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and in three days I will build another, not made with hands." Making a threat against the temple could qualify for the death penalty, but obviously that's not what Jesus was speaking about when he said this, rather he was speaking of his own body and his resurrection. Yet, as the parade of witnesses come forward spewing lies, the witnesses did not agree. As they tried to orchestrate a false charge against Jesus, they couldn't all keep the same story.

While all this is going on in front of Jesus, he keeps his mouth shut. He doesn't dignify this mock trial with a response and he doesn't bother to defend himself against these false accusations. Rather, he fulfills the prophet Isaiah's words:

"He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth." (Isaiah 53:7, ESV)

This mock trial was literally imploding. The religious leaders couldn't get their false witnesses on the same page, and Caiaphas is losing his cool. This was their chance to finally knocking of Jesus, and the opportunity is slipping through their fingers—and Jesus is not even speaking a word! In a last ditch effort, Caiaphas asks an incriminating question, "Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed." By the "Son of the Blessed," he means "the Son of God." In other words, Caiaphas ask Jesus plainly, "Are you the Messiah and are you God?" If Jesus had wanted to, he could have continued to keep silent. If he answered this question, it would obviously incriminate him and they would be able to convict him of death on the grounds of blasphemy. However, this was Jesus time. Though he has kept his identity as the Christ disclosed for much of his ministry, this was his hour. So Jesus answers truthfully, knowing that certain death awaits him. "Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?" Jesus answered, "I am, and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hadn't of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven."

Jesus answer left all gathered at the council in shock. Jesus just admitted that he was not only the Messiah, but God. Not only that, but he references the prophecy of Daniel 7 of the coming Son of Man as the Messianic king who would come in the clouds of the Shikinah glory of God who wields complete dominion over the earth. Here is what the prophet Daniel records,

"I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed." (Daniel 7:13–14, ESV)

The religious leaders, who knew Daniel 7 well, stood dumbfounded. Did Jesus really just say that? Did he really just confess to be the Christ and the Son of God? Yet in a council of liars, Jesus speaks the truth. He is the Christ, and God stands amongst the leaders of Israel. Jesus makes it clear, that though they gather to judge him, that in the end as the Son of Man he alone will bring final judgment. Not only does Jesus give them the confession they want, but he gives them a firm warning.

Whatever semblance of a legitimate trial this midnight gathering had, it quickly faded away. The trial turned into a riot after Jesus' words. The high priest tore his garments crying out, "What further witnesses do we need? You have heard his blasphemy. What is your decision?" In unison, all there agreed he ought to be condemned to die. The council turned into a lynch-mob, spitting upon Jesus, punching his face, and mockingly calling out for him to prophesy. The guards joined in the abuse of the religious leaders and continued the assault upon Christ, in one of the longest nights in human history.

Yet, see the faithfulness of Jesus! In the face of his enemies, he did not buckle in fear. With steadfastness, he stood upon the truth. Though he was trialed unfairly, the teacher who taught us to turn the other cheek does just that. Rather, in a concert of lies, Jesus alone stands for the truth, no matter the abuse it brings him. Look how faithful Christ was, even though his faithfulness brought him certain pain and sorrow. He was faithful for us and obedient to his Father's command. Jesus met his mission square in the face without fear. He would try to skirt around the sufferings of the cross, but rather he boldly goes to the cross without apprehension.

We can see how Jesus' example here would have encouraged a persecuted in Rome (most likely the target audience for this gospel). As the Romans tossed Christians into the arena to be devoured by lions or lit them on fire to illuminate the emperor's garden, Jesus' serenity before his bloodthirsty accusers serves as a powerful example. Though our situation is different today, Jesus model of faithfulness is an example to us too. Christians stand before the mock court of public opinion every day. Enemies accuse us and deride the teachings of our savior. However, like Christ, we must stand for truth no matter the consequences. We must resolve to be a faithful witness to Christ no matter the violence of our accusers.

No matter how valiant our efforts, we will never be as faithful as Christ! Though Christ should be our example, we are not the confident Jesus before his accusers, rather we are the cowardly Peter who shy's away from the interrogation of a little girl.

The Cowardice of Peter (v. 66-72)

As Peter sits by the fire in the lower courtyard watching his master's trial commence, he initially shows his willingness to follow through on his promise. If he must die with Jesus, he must! When Peter witnesses the bogus trial proceed, he gets cold feet. He heard the bloodlust in their accusations. He saw the thrown together court turn into an angry mob. He smelt the stench of death in the air. Peter knew that if he stuck around too much longer, he's death would follow!

When a servant girl of the high priest approached Peter, she recognized him as a Nazarene, like Jesus. She calls him out by the fire, "You also were with the Nazarene, Jesus." But Peter flat out denied it. He said, "I neither know nor understand what you mean." He gave a non-answer. In other words, he said, "What are you even asking me?" In fear, Peter realizes he needs to get out of there. He goes towards the gateway as the rooster first crows. The servant girl then begins to point out the the bystanders that Peter is one of Jesus' followers! This second time, Peter denies the girls accusations before the crowd. Now the crowd begins to get more suspicious. The people confront Peter and charge him, "Certainly you are one of them, for you are a Galilean." Peter's response has gone from feigning ignorance, flat out denial, and finally he invokes a curse. He swears, "I do not know this man of whom you speak." Immediately after he spoke the third denial, the rooster crowed a second time. At that time the words of Jesus filled his mind, "Before the rooster crows twice, you will deny me three times." Ashamed of his cowardice and failure, Peter broke down and wept. As the bloody and beaten Jesus was taken to Pilate, I'm sure Peter made eye contact with Jesus. He had failed Jesus. Just in his teachers greatest moment of need, he had denied him to save his own skin.

Though we should all strive to be faithful to Christ, we must confess our cowardice. Like Peter, we are usually more interested in saving ourselves from suffering than we are standing for the truth. Yet, our lives are rarely on the line for Jesus in our culture. The worst that may befall us is criticism and alienation from mainstream society. Persecution against Christians in our country has yet to take a violent turn. However, there are Christians around the world who face execution for their faith in Jesus. How much more shameful is our own cowardice, our unwillingness to share the Gospel? Do you hide your Christian identity from your co-workers in fear of what they might think? Do you deny Jesus by pretending you don't know him before a watching world? If we are honest with ourselves, we fail Jesus through our inaction, by failing to stand up for the truth of the Gospel before a world that spews forth criticism. In light of our failures, may we join Peter, break down, and weep over our sin.

However, in this passage we see that Jesus is faithful to us, even though we are unfaithful to him. Even though Peter denied Jesus, Jesus still chose to go to the cross. Though all of his disciples abandoned him and denied him, Jesus went through with God's plan to redeem the world. As Jesus hung upon the cross, he was judged in the place of sinners like you and me. Jesus absorbed the penalty of God's wrath, so that unfaithful sinners like us might be made the righteousness of God. Thanks be to God, that our standing before him doesn't depend on our faithfulness, but upon Christ's faithfulness! Like Peter, we are cowards and failures. Behold the courage and conviction of Christ, who stands silent before his accusers and who speaks truth in the court of liars, even if it means his certain death!

Jesus does this for us in love. Trust that your standing before God isn't dependent on your ability to be faithful to Jesus, but rather we stand boldly before God because Jesus was faithful for us. He did what we could not. He had courage when we have none. As we trust in Jesus as our savior and Lord, he gives us supernatural courage, courage that comes only by the indwelling Spirit of God.

Final Thoughts

When Mary I, better known as Bloody Mary, took the throne in England, she sought to understand the reforms that had taken place, and that meant taking out the architect of the English reformation, Thomas Cranmer. Cranmer and his friends were imprisoned and they were condemned to treason. Cranmer was forced to watch as his friends burned to their deaths. However, after a few months, Cranmer gave into the pressure to recant his Protestant convictions and agree to submit to papal authority. Although he recanted privately, he had to do so publicly in the pulpit of University Church in Oxford. However, much to the surprise of Queen Mary, Cranmer denounced his recantation and declared that he stood firm on his beliefs. Knowing that this act of defiance against the throne would result in his execution, he promised before the crowd that at his execution he would hold out the hand that signed the recantation and burn it first. Immediately, Cranmer was taken from his pulpit and tied to the stake. Fulfilling his words, he put his hand in the fire first crying out as he died, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.... I see the heavens open and Jesus standing at the right hand of God."

The martyrdom of Thomas Cranmer is important. So often we don't have the backbone to stand for our convictions. We wave and wobble under the pressure of a watching world. However, though we at times waver, we must resolve to have the faithfulness of Christ. We must take a strong stance upon the truth. We must resolve to stand firm before a watching world and be sure our knees don't buckle as we do. However, even when we fail, Christ in his grace gives us another chance.

At the end of the day, no matter our past failures, we take comfort in the fact that we are accepted on Christ's account, not our own. Like Peter, we cower under the accusations of a little servant girl. However, that same Peter would go on to be filled with the Spirit's power. He received forgiveness from Jesus for his denial, and filled with courage, at his execution he chose to be crucified upside down, because he did not believe he deserved to be executed in the same way as his savior.

The faithfulness of Christ empowers us for the task ahead. When we are weak we throw ourselves upon his strength. He will help us and by his faithfulness, we will be accounted worthy before God!

