

FOLLOWERS FAIL

SERIES: THE FINAL HOURS



Catalog No. 20180304

Matthew 26:69–27:8

Fourth Message

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March 4, 2018

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I love my father. Dad and I have a very close relationship. Other than my mother, he is my biggest supporter. From my earliest memories, Dad has showered me with unconditional love.

Dad encouraged me in all my pursuits. Even when I first chose to pursue a degree and career in acting, he was behind me. And then, when I changed my major from Theatre to Biblical Studies, Dad didn't bat an eyelash. He said—either way, she won't make much money, but either way, she can serve God—and that pleased him. It seemed easy to please my dad. I saw and felt his delight in me, and his belief in my gifts and talents was clear. The security of our relationship is one of the main reasons I became a brave and confident woman.

Do you have a safe and loving relationship like this with someone? It doesn't have to be your father. Think of the person with whom you have great mutual love and respect. Do you have them in your mind? Now think about disappointing them. It hurts badly when you let down your loved ones, doesn't it?

A few years ago, I was in a tricky situation with a friend. I made a choice. I did something for this friend, and I could tell my father did not approve. He didn't say anything to me directly, but he got really quiet about the situation. In my experience, nothing good comes when someone you love goes quiet.

Because I knew him so well, I knew Dad's silence held disapproval. He didn't think that what I'd done was wise. He would have done something different. And as I sat in my father's silence, I got that hollow feeling in the pit of my stomach. I began to question my decision. I felt insecure. For days, I carried a heavy weight on my shoulders, all because I failed to live up to my father's good expectations of me.

Have you ever experienced this? It's a terrible feeling, isn't it? And isn't this feeling amplified when the one we love and let down is God?

When I think of God, two things are very clear to me: first, God loves unconditionally; and second, God has clear and high expectations of how his followers should live. So, when you let God down, when you sin big, doesn't it hurt? I can't speak for you. I know that when I sin, when I mess up with God, I get that sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach, just like I do with my dad.

I love God. And I let him down. When I do, I usually do two things at the same time. Externally, I want to save face to the world, so I try to minimize what I've done. I tell myself—it's not so bad. And if there were witnesses to my sin, I might try to cover up my mess or make excuses for why I did what I did. But internally, alone with the knowledge of my sin, I shrivel up and wallow. I feel blanketed with shame. It is hard to deal with these emotions. It can be hard to move on from the disappointment you have caused.

Today we will study two short stories in Matthew that connect us to a universal truth of the Christian life: followers of God fail. We will see that no matter how close you are to Jesus, no matter your status or maturity as a disciple, all of us at some time or another will fall short of God's expectations. Even when we know we are loved by God. Even when we love God with our whole hearts. Followers fail.

Today, we will focus not on Jesus, but on two of the disciples of Christ who fail miserably. We will see the aftermath of their failures, and watch them struggle to cope and move on. I hope that we will draw great encouragement from their stories.

We pick up the story of Jesus' passion week with Jesus in the custody of the Jewish religious leaders. Remember, Judas has already betrayed Jesus to the authorities. Jesus has been taken away to be questioned. We will jump into the story and into a courtyard near where Jesus is being held.

Matthew 26:69-75:

Now Peter was sitting outside in the courtyard. And a servant girl came up to him and said, "You also were with Jesus the

Galilean.” 70 But he denied it before them all, saying, “I do not know what you mean.” 71 And when he went out to the entrance, another servant girl saw him, and she said to the bystanders, “This man was with Jesus of Nazareth.” 72 And again he denied it with an oath: “I do not know the man.” 73 After a little while the bystanders came up and said to Peter, “Certainly you too are one of them, for your accent betrays you.” 74 Then he began to invoke a curse on himself and to swear, “I do not know the man.” And immediately the rooster crowed. 75 And Peter remembered the saying of Jesus, “Before the rooster crows, you will deny me three times.” And he went out and wept bitterly.

We begin with the disciple Peter. Peter has followed Jesus after he was arrested and taken before the Jewish authorities. Peter sits outside in the courtyard, likely waiting and wondering what is happening to Jesus. We might interpret this as loyal Peter, holding onto faith when all other disciples have scattered.

Did you notice that as the pressure on Peter escalates, he puts both physical and verbal space between himself and Jesus? He starts out in the courtyard nearest to Jesus, but after he is questioned by the first servant girl, he removes himself to the entrance. After the third encounter, when he is questioned by the bystanders and makes his final denial, Peter withdraws completely.

Also notice that each time Peter is questioned, his response escalates. The first time he is asked if he is with Jesus, he simply denies it, essentially saying, “I don’t know what you are talking about.” The second time he denies knowing Jesus “with an oath.” This goes directly against the teaching of Jesus, who said in Matthew 5, “Do not take an oath at all... Let what you say be simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No’; anything more than this comes from evil” (Matthew 5:34, 37). Instead, Peter swears before witnesses, bluntly rejecting any association with Jesus.

And finally, we have this curious sentence that Peter ‘began to invoke a curse on himself and to swear, “I do not know the man.”’ Continuing to swear and lie about knowing Jesus, Peter now tosses in a curse. To curse was to bind something verbally, to use words like a noose against an enemy. To curse was to call down the worst evil and destruction on someone. Yikes, Peter!

The ESV Bible says Peter began to invoke a curse “on himself,” but those words are not in the Greek text; they are the supplied, interpretive choice of the translators. Matthew did not record the object of Peter’s curse, but

there are three options. Peter could have cursed himself. But Peter could just as easily cursed the bystanders. After all, they kept pestering him about his association with that scandalous, now arrested and disgraced prophet.

Or perhaps, even more compelling and shocking, is the third option—that Peter cursed Jesus. Perhaps under the persistent scrutiny of the crowd, Peter felt exposed and vulnerable. Maybe he did not want to get wrapped up in what might happen to Jesus. What if they found out he was one of Jesus’ inner circle, and they arrested him too?

Regardless of who is the object of the curse, we can feel the pressure mounting for Peter. He was in such a desperate position that he swore and cursed and lied, none of which would please his Lord. Immediately after the third denial, as Jesus had recently predicted, a rooster crowed, and at that moment Peter knew he had utterly failed.

Look at the aftermath of Peter’s failure as a disciple. Matthew writes that Peter, “wept bitterly.” There are several words used in the New Testament for crying or weeping. The word used with Peter’s weeping is most often used as people mourn a death. I doubt that Peter wept bitterly over the pending death of Jesus. Rather, I think he wept bitterly at his own death.

I am not talking about his physical death. I am proposing that Peter saw his denial of Jesus as a spiritual death. To deny his association with Christ so plainly, so strongly, so crassly—for Peter, this is the ultimate failure of faith.

Can we pause and realize what a huge moment this is in the Gospels? This is Peter! Peter, who left a thriving fishing business behind to follow a new, unknown, prophet. The man Jesus renamed, calling him “the rock” on whom God would build his church. Peter, the witness to most of Jesus’ miracles; one of only three witnesses of the Transfiguration of Jesus. Peter is the disciple who first declared Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God.

Peter stuck with Jesus for three years, even as his Lord became very unpopular with the religious authorities. Earlier in Matthew 26, Peter declared that he would never fall away from Jesus or deny knowing him. And now, we see Peter deny Jesus three times and walk away.

Followers fail. Even the most faithful disciples of Jesus have failed. Even those you might consider elite—disciples of wisdom and status—even they fail. Even Peter.

And what about us? We are likely no better than Peter. Is wallowing in our weakness, failures, and sin the end of our stories as disciples? What encouragement can we draw from this story? Peter's bitter weeping is the last we see of him in the Gospel of Matthew. But we can draw hope from looking at Peter's story as a whole.

This spring, in our Thursday morning Women's Connection ministry, we are studying the discipleship, leadership, and teachings of Peter. I decided to find a way to visually map Peter's discipleship in the Gospels. I looked at every mention, action, and spoken word of Peter in the Gospels. I developed a points system and then charted the results. Here is what I discovered about Peter's discipleship in the Gospel of Matthew. Peter had some great moments of faith in the three years he followed Jesus, but often he fell in some kind of failure.

Of course, my ranking system and chart are completely subjective; discipleship is not something to be scored. But what I want you to see is that Peter had a lot of highs, but he had just as many lows. This "rock" among Jesus' disciples was also the one who sank in the waters of Galilee. Peter is the one who harshly rebuked Jesus (Matthew 16). He worried about his heavenly inheritance ((Matthew 19), and he promptly fell asleep after Jesus asked him to stay alert while Jesus was praying in Gethsemane (Matthew 26).

Witnessing Peter's denial of Jesus and his bitter weeping should not leave us discouraged about discipleship—Peter's or our own. Instead, we need to look back at his whole journey and see that Peter, for all his greatness, was also human. Peter failed epically. He emphatically denied knowing Jesus in public, three different times.

I don't know about you, but I find this fact oddly comforting. I am not alone as a sinner! I am not the only failure to have followed Jesus. Here is something we need to embrace: failure is part of discipleship. Failure is normal.

If Jesus recruited disciples who were perfect, then they would be automatons, not humans! You are human, and humans fail. Even those who love and follow Jesus. Even those who more-often-than-not please God will end up failing him at some point. Likely more than once. Look at Peter's story!

Yes, you will fail and disappoint God by your actions. It is painful and can be hard to come back from. But can we forgive ourselves for being human? Can we climb out of the pit of our failure and find hope for a future life

with Jesus? I think it would be so helpful, even a radical act of self-care if we learned to accept failure as a normal part of discipleship.

Again, look at Peter's story for encouragement. Though he is not mentioned by name in the rest of the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 28 records the disciples' final moments with the resurrected Jesus. 28:17 says that, "when they saw him they worshiped him, but some doubted." Have you ever noticed this phrase in the story—"but some doubted?"

In his next breath, Jesus tells his gathered disciples—even the doubting ones—even Peter who denied him—"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:18-20). We call this the great commission.

Jesus doesn't give up on disciples that fail. Not the doubters, or the deniers. He knows that his disciples will fail, and when they fail, they can learn. With even a small measure of faith, disciples can learn from their mistakes and move forward, hopefully making better choices in the future. Jesus didn't cast off Peter. Jesus commissioned Peter. Jesus gave Peter and the other doubters his authority and his Spirit! He asked them to continue his work on earth.

What if we could understand that failure is not just a normal part of discipleship. What if we understood that failure grows faith? Think of failure like compost. Many of us compost. Some of our cities require it, so you'll understand this analogy.

After we make a meal, we gather up scraps of food, and we place them in a compost bin with yard waste like leaves and wood chips. The bacteria in the scraps of food, along with other things like fungus and worms, leads to decomposition. Compost can look and smell nasty, but you eventually end up with nutrient-rich, organic material that will make your garden grow. It is amazing how decayed food scraps can lead to plump and delicious vegetables that we get to eat. This cycle can help us be healthy, and when we are healthy, we can thrive.

Failure is the compost of faith, a natural and necessary part of growing as a disciple of Jesus. The problem is that we do not like failure. Failure hurts. It makes us uncomfortable. It brings us embarrassment and shame. It can make us doubt ourselves to the point of giving up. And big failures can ruin lives.

Is there any other place in the world where failure might be more unwelcome than Silicon Valley, an innovation and educational hub of the world? So many of us are strivers, achievers, people with high aspirations and expectations. Failure is an expletive around here.

But you do not have to be a part of the working world to understand this dynamic. I know so many people who are struggling in their relationships with spouses, family, friends, and God. It seems that when we fail those we love—in big ways, and in small, everyday ways—it is so hard to forgive ourselves. We carry around the weight of our shame for so long that it starts to change our posture. Eventually, if we do not make a change, we become these stooped creatures, not capable of lifting our heads to look for what good things may lay ahead.

It would serve us so well if we could accept that failure is a natural part of life and if we could approach it as an opportunity. And imagine how our faith would flourish if we began to both expect and accept failure as part of following Jesus! Of course, we shouldn't be lazy or seek failure, but when we fail, if we could see failure as this nutrient-rich ingredient to help us grow in the Lord—just think of what might happen!

Look at what happened to Peter. Jesus didn't just give him the great commission that he gave all the other disciples. Jesus also gave Peter a personal commission, except it's not in Matthew. We have to borrow the story from John's Gospel. There, in chapter 21, you may remember Peter's encounter with the risen Jesus. On the shores of the Sea of Galilee, Jesus asks Peter three times, "Do you love me?" And each time Peter responds, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." And Jesus repeats this commission, "Feed my sheep." (John 21:15-17)

Peter failed in his journey of discipleship. He denied Jesus three times. And three times, Jesus gave Peter the opportunity to reaffirm his faith. Satisfied with Peter's declaration of love, knowing his heart, Jesus commissioned this failed disciple to lead the early church. Look how Peter flourished! Think of the stories of Peter in the book of Acts. He became a confident and wise leader of the early church. Even in the face of ridicule, imprisonment, and possible death for his faith, Peter was unshakeable.

What would the church look like if we all stopped running from, denying, minimizing, or hiding our failures? How would our community of faith be transformed if we realized that the ground zero of our failure is a great place to grow. And that ground zero might be the exact place where Jesus gives us a new mission?

Failure grows faith. It worked for Peter, and it can work for you if you allow it to. Peter is a positive example of what can happen if we stick with Jesus, even after we've failed. But the next story in Matthew gives us a very different picture of what can happen when we fail.

Matthew 27:1-8:

When morning came, all the chief priests and the elders of the people took counsel against Jesus to put him to death. 2 And they bound him and led him away and delivered him over to Pilate the governor. 3 Then when Judas, his betrayer, saw that Jesus was condemned, he changed his mind and brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and the elders, 4 saying, "I have sinned by betraying innocent blood." They said, "What is that to us? See to it yourself." 5 And throwing down the pieces of silver into the temple, he departed, and he went and hanged himself. 6 But the chief priests, taking the pieces of silver, said, "It is not lawful to put them into the treasury, since it is blood money." 7 So they took counsel and bought with them the potter's field as a burial place for strangers. 8 Therefore that field has been called the Field of Blood to this day.

Here is the notorious man named Judas. We know very little about him. The Gospels report only three main things about him: he was one of the twelve disciples, he betrayed Jesus to the Jewish authorities, and he did it in exchange for 30 pieces of silver.

Almost every time Judas is mentioned in the Gospels, he is labeled the betrayer. Films have portrayed him as a dark, brooding figure, always near to Jesus, but aloof. We often cast him as the sinister disciple with no nuance to his character. We discard any evidence of his faith because of his betrayal.

I believe Matthew included the story of Judas after the story of Peter, because he wants us to contrast the two disciples. Though Peter bitterly mourned his failure as a disciple, he eventually returned to the other disciples to wait and see about Jesus. Eventually, Peter encountered the risen Jesus and was restored and commissioned. Judas' story ends very differently. Ultimately, plagued by what he did to Jesus, Judas killed himself. Death is certainly not the outcome we want when disciples fail. Even when they fail miserably.

Before we close the book on Judas and use him only as example of what not to do, let's look carefully at the

story. Perhaps we can learn something positive from Judas too. Maybe he did something right.

Notice that in verse 3, when Judas saw that the Jewish leaders were taking Jesus to Pilate, Judas, “changed his mind.” This verb could also be translated, “he repented.” Of course, like so many things in Scripture, scholars debate about whether Judas was truly repentant. We cannot know for sure unless we could ask Judas directly, but we can look carefully at the text and form an opinion.

What Judas did next certainly looks like repentance to me. Judas went to the temple—the place of God’s presence among his people, the place where Jews went to make sacrifices for their sin—and there he admitted that he sinned. He said this to the chief priests and the elders! He wanted to give that reward money back, but they would not accept it, so Judas threw down the bag of silver and left.

There is an important lesson that we can learn from Judas. He felt the weight of his sin, and he did something about it. He repented through speech and action. He returned the money, which is significant if his only motive for betraying Jesus was money. But zero in on Judas’ statement too, “I have sinned by betraying innocent blood.” That is a very clear and specific confession.

When was the last time you confessed like this? Maybe if you are in a private space, alone with Jesus, you might be this clear and specific. But when was the last time you failed, and went up to someone involved and named your sin? I don’t know that this happens all that often. We may make soft apologies to our closest friends and family, and we may weakly express regret in our actions, but how often do we practice Judas’ type of confession?

When I was a kid I fought a lot with my brothers. We got into all kinds of stupid arguments like whose turn it was to sit in the front seat of the van, who ate the last cookie, and who was to blame for the softball-sized slime-stain on the ceiling. Arguments often led to name-calling and hurt feelings. Like the good parents they were, my mom and dad could swoop into the aftermath and sniff out the culprit, get a confession, and then make use apologize to our siblings. When asked to apologize, I was famous for yelling “Fine!” and then grunting out a very unsorry apology.

I guess we have started learning how to make things right somewhere. But friends, few of us in this room are children—and I am not talking about our age. A maturing faith in Jesus means that we need to step up, not back away, when we sin. Judas is a positive example for us in his moments in the Temple. Like Judas, we can learn to confess boldly.

Perhaps bold confession could be the antidote to apathy, self-hatred, and stagnation in our faith. Maybe if we were more accepting of failure, confession would be easier. Of any place in the world, the church should be the safest place to confess our sins, except it isn’t. It seems no easier to confess in here to each other, than it is to confess our failures out in the world. But disciples of Jesus are called to something more, something better than avoidance and weak apologies. We are called to repentance and confession.

The Apostle John, in his first letter, wrote, “If we confess our sins, he [Jesus] is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9). And James, in his letter urges us to, “confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed” (James 5:16). Are you ready to step up in maturity and confess boldly?

The tragic thing about Judas is that, though he repented and confessed, he left no room for restoration. He took his soul and his life in his own hands and made a final judgement, but judgment belongs to the Lord. Do not be like Judas and end your discipleship story prematurely. Instead, like Judas, confess boldly and then, like Peter, wait for Jesus. Whatever you have done or failed to do, Jesus is willing and able to forgive you. He will restore you and recommission you in his mission.

I encourage you to take the next few minutes to sit quietly and think about the examples of Peter and Judas. Perhaps reflect on one of these questions: do you need to be more accepting of your failures as a disciple? Would you benefit from seeing your failure as an opportunity for growth? Do you need to stop hiding and boldly confess your sins before God and others? God bless you as you seek these answers.