

As you study the Bible, you find that in nearly every episode of the life and ministry of Jesus Christ, Simon Peter is somewhere nearby. Most of the twelve disciples are scarcely mentioned by name in the four gospel accounts. The disciple believed to be the “beloved disciple,” John is mentioned about twenty times by name in the Gospels, as is Judas Iscariot who betrayed Jesus. Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother, is mentioned twelve times, Thomas the doubter ten times, and the other disciples less than three times each. However, Peter on the other hand is mentioned by name over 120 times. Did you know that? Peter is not only mentioned more often than the other disciples in the Gospels, but he is also the leading figure among the twelve in the first half of the Acts of the Apostles.

In the gospels, Peter is often portrayed as a flawed disciple – one who seeks to follow Jesus, yet one who is also confused and struggling. This stands in contrast to the normal patterns in history where, over time, less flattering episodes in a beloved figure’s life become minimized or forgotten, and only their more heroic acts remembered. However, the Gospels, all written after Peter’s death, do just the opposite. They paint Peter as a flawed follower of Jesus Christ.

Why would they do this to the memory of one of their most beloved leaders? Adam Hamilton in his book *Simon Peter Flawed but Faithful Disciple* which we will be discussing in our Wednesday Night Bible Study, believes the Gospel writers were comfortable telling these stories because Peter himself told these stories over and over during his last thirty years of life. Peter highlighted his own faults, using his shortcomings to relate with the common struggles and failings of ordinary followers of Jesus like you and me.

You just have to love Peter. In a way, Peter’s story is our story. Peter is more like you and me than any of the other disciples. He represents both our strengths and our weaknesses. He was a born leader, hard worker, and faithful. Yet he was also hard headed, prone to jump into action without first thinking about the consequences, and said whatever came to his mind. He suffered like some of us from foot and mouth disease; you know, open mouth, insert foot. With Peter, what you saw was what you got. But with all his faults, he loved the Lord. In a way, he was loyal to a fault.

This morning, let’s look at some of Peter’s weaker moments and see how we relate to them and what we can learn from them. Let’s start with the story found in Matthew 16, verses 13-19 and 21-23.

Read Matthew 16:13-19, 21-23

In this story, Jesus asks the disciples: “Who do the people say that I am?” In other words, who do they think I am, what are they saying about me? Have you ever been in a class where the professor asked a thought-provoking question and no one was bold enough to be the first to

answer for fear of being embarrassed? So, in this case, the disciples wanting to be careful started listing several prominent Jewish figures - John the Baptist, Elijah the great prophet, and one of the prophets such as Jeremiah. Traditionally, these were believed to be forerunners of the Messiah, the long-awaited anointed one sent by God to redeem Israel. The disciples were taking the careful way out. By indicating that Jesus is just preparing the way for the Messiah, they could wait or delay making any commitments to follow Him.

But Jesus is never satisfied with a half-hearted or lukewarm answer, so He presses them; have they been listening to Him and have they seen the miracles He has performed? Forget what other people think; who do you say that I am? Who am I to you? Now I can visualize the disciples, acting like some in my Wednesday night class when I ask a tough question. They were all looking down at their feet, not wanting to make eye contact. But we all know Peter and his habit of speaking before thinking. However, this time he got it right. Peter boldly declares: "You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God." This is one of the great declarations of faith in the Bible.

Jesus asked this question over 2,000 years ago, and He is still asking the same question today. Who am I to you; who do you say that I am? This question is addressed to each one of us here this morning. Who is Jesus Christ to you? That's basically what religion is all about folks – who is Jesus and what is our relationship with Him. How would you respond when someone asked you who is Jesus Christ to you. These are serious questions that we need to consider and give serious thought to how we would reply because it will reflect how close we are to the Lord.

In verses 21-23, Jesus begins to explain to His disciples that He would be killed by the religious leaders and rise from the grave on the third day. Now this did not sit well with Peter. This was not his plan for Jesus' life, what Peter expected Jesus to do. Like his fellow Jews, he expected Jesus to be the warrior Messiah who would drive out the hated Romans and restore Israel to its past glory under kings David and Solomon. So, Peter takes Jesus aside and rebukes Him, saying: "Never Lord! This shall never happen to You." Once again, we see both the faithful and flawed side of Peter. He had just correctly proclaimed that Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah, but now he could not comprehend the fact that this Messiah must suffer at the hands of sinful men and die to fulfill God's plan for salvation.

Then Jesus turns and tells Peter: "Get thee behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men." Now the *Message* interprets Jesus' words like this: "Peter, get out of my way, get lost. You have no idea how God works." Now Jesus' harsh, pointed words to Peter got me to thinking. As I noted earlier, Peter represents each of us. How many times do we respond like Peter, thinking that we know what is better for the other person or situation? For instance, we think that everybody's religious experience should be exactly as ours. That their doctrine and theology should match ours. We

believe that everybody should think, act and look just like us. At many of our conferences, seminars, and retreats, we try to mold new believers into what we think they should be. We like to tell others what to do, thinking we know better than they do.

But remember what I have often said – it's a relationship, not a religion. We are all unique and different, and our relationship with the Lord is personal; it's between Him and us only. There is no cookie cut approach; no one way that fits all. Peter was trying to make Jesus fit into his way of thinking instead of following the will of God. Think how often we hinder and restrict the power and actions of the Spirit by insisting on our own way, not walking in faith, and seeing what God will do.

Now when you are tempted, have you ever repeated Jesus' words: "Get thee behind me, Satan?" Despite a severely limited budget, the wife of a penny-pinching pastor bought herself a pretty dress for Easter. Her husband rebuked her saying: "When you were tempted to buy it, you should have said, "Get thee behind me, Satan." "That's what I did say," the minister's wife replied, "and then I heard Satan whisper, "It look very nice from back here too."

Now let's look at another one of the interesting stories in the life of Peter as found in Matthew 26, verses 31-35 and 69-75.

Read Matthew 26:31-35, 69-75

After Jesus washes the disciples' feet as the ultimate example of servant leadership and institutes the Lord's Supper, Jesus shocks the disciples by telling them that before the night is over all of them will desert Him. Once again, this does not sit well with Peter. So, in his normal custom, he boldly proclaims: "Jesus, I don't know about the rest of these guys, but I will always be by your side; I've got your back!" Bold words from a man who will deny Jesus three times before the night is over.

Knowing Peter's faults, Jesus tells him something that will come to haunt him: "Truly, I tell you this very night, before the rooster crows, you will deny me three times." These must have been painful words for Peter to hear, being singled out by Jesus. Peter was known for speaking before thinking, and making bold statements. As you consider this encounter, have you ever thought that Jesus may have used this as a teaching moment. He saw great potential in Peter and needed to groom him for the mission He had for Peter. As you review your life in hindsight, can you see where Jesus or life has been harsh as you were being groomed to be who you are today? In a way, Jesus was providing tough love. We all know from experience that there are times in life when we have had to be harsh with others for their own good, such as our children.

Now, as the late Paul Harvey would say, we all know the rest of the story. As predicted Peter denied knowing Jesus three times. But sometimes we miss two key points in this story. First, we often remember Peter for his denial that night, and forget the courage it took for Peter to

follow Jesus and enter the courtyard of the high priest that night, where the temple guards and others could have recognized him as the one who had earlier cut the ear off of one of the servants. Believe me that took courage! Second, think where we got this story from? It had to come from Peter himself since he was the only one there. By telling this story, Peter shows how he relates to us today.

Now the question for us this morning is do we deny Jesus like Peter did? Peter loved Jesus just as much as we do, but he still failed Jesus. Do we do the same? Do we deny Jesus by our thoughts, words, and actions, by what we have done or by what we should have done but didn't? We have all lived at times in ways that were inconsistent with our vow to follow Jesus. We have mistreated others, judged them, and spread gossip about them. We need to continually ask ourselves am I denying Jesus by how I live, how I treat others?

Finally, let's look at one of the final experiences in Peter's life as found in John 18, verses 10-11.

Read John 18:10-11

Each of the gospels record that when Judas approaches with the temple police, one of the disciples draws a sword and cut off the ear of one of the servants of the high priest. Only the Gospel of John identifies the disciple as Peter. Peter sprang into action. It should be noted that once more Peter was the only one of the twelve who took action. The other disciples stood there in fear with that deer in headlights look. His act of courage was an attempt to do precisely what he had promised Jesus after supper, to stay with Jesus rather than to desert Him. He was trying to protect Jesus.

But as usual, Peter was acting without considering the consequences. When you step back and look at what was happening that night, his reaction by drawing a sword could have gotten all the other disciples and Jesus killed or imprisoned on the spot, thus bringing to an end the important work Jesus had come to do. Think about it, if the disciples were killed, who would have carried on the work of Jesus and spread the Good News around the world.

So, Jesus turned to Peter and said: "Put your sword away! Do you think that I'm not able to ask my Father and He will send more than twelve legions of angels right way?" Once more Peter was acting boldly, trying to protect Jesus, and once more again, Jesus corrected Peter.

Do we try to serve God, take action, react without thinking and following our will and not God's will? Do we think we know better than God? How often have we intervened in someone else's struggles when God was trying to help them grow in their faith. Also, think about how the Church has overreacted over the centuries and especially today, following the ways of the world and not God, thinking that we know better what God wants.

In closing, what can we learn from these three stories. I think a key point is that Peter's story shows us that we need not be defined by our failures. God, in His amazing grace, does not define us by the worst thing we ever did. I hope all of you hear that. In addition, Jesus can make amazing use of flawed disciples like you and me. He continually invites us back, forgives us and restores us. Jesus is the Lord of second chances. If the disciple who denied knowing Jesus can become the rock upon which the Church was built, then there is hope for you and me also. Ultimately, Jesus can use our failures and shortcomings to light the path for others. While we as Christians might see ourselves in Peter's flaws, we should also see ourselves in the moments of Peter's courage and faithfulness. Ultimately, we may also see in him a picture of what we may aspire to be when empowered and led by the Spirit. That's Simon Peter's story. Will it be yours? Amen