

Sermon for Sunday, March 18, 2012
Dr. Dan Doriani
The Tale of Three Failures
Mark 14:66-15:15, 8:2, 8:8

Mark 14:66 While Peter was below in the courtyard, one of the servant girls of the high priest came by. 67 When she saw Peter warming himself, she looked closely at him. "You also were with that Nazarene, Jesus," she said. 68 But he denied it. "I don't know or understand what you're talking about," he said, and went out into the entryway. 69 When the servant girl saw him there, she said again to those standing around, "This fellow is one of them." 70 Again he denied it. After a little while, those standing near said to Peter, "Surely you are one of them, for you are a Galilean." 71 He began to call down curses on himself, and he swore to them, "I don't know this man you're talking about." 72 Immediately the rooster crowed the second time. Then Peter remembered the word Jesus had spoken to him: "Before the rooster crows twice you will disown me three times." And he broke down and wept.

15:1 Very early in the morning, the chief priests, with the elders, the teachers of the law and the whole Sanhedrin, reached a decision. They bound Jesus, led him away and handed him over to Pilate. 2 "Are you the king of the Jews?" asked Pilate. "Yes, it is as you say," Jesus replied. 3 The chief priests accused him of many things. 4 So again Pilate asked him, "Aren't you going to answer? See how many things they are accusing you of." 5 But Jesus still made no reply, and Pilate was amazed. 6 Now it was the custom at the Feast to release a prisoner whom the people requested. 7 A man called Barabbas was in prison with the insurrectionists who had committed murder in the uprising. 8 The crowd came up and asked Pilate to do for them what he usually did. 9 "Do you want me to release to you the king of the Jews?" asked Pilate, 10 knowing it was out of envy that the chief priests had handed Jesus over to him. 11 But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have Pilate release Barabbas instead. 12 "What shall I do, then, with the one you call the king of the Jews?" Pilate asked them. 13 "Crucify him!" they shouted. 14 "Why? What crime has he committed?" asked Pilate. But they shouted all the louder, "Crucify him!" 15 Wanting to satisfy the crowd, Pilate released Barabbas to them. He had Jesus flogged, and handed him over to be crucified.

1. Peter: A failure of faithfulness (Mark 14:66-72)

Today we have a tale of three failures, three men – Peter, Judas, Pilate – who failed both Jesus and themselves. Peter's tale is well-known, but we must put it in its context. Mark places the trials of Jesus and Peter side by side, as contrasts.

- Jesus is falsely accused of sedition and blasphemy; Peter is rightly "accused" of being Jesus' disciple.¹
- Jesus is questioned by high priests; Peter is questioned by the priest's servants.
- Both men swear to tell the truth. But while Jesus stands before his questioners "denying nothing, Peter cowers before his questioners and denies everything."

You may recall that Jesus warned Peter that Satan would test him that night. "But I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned again, strengthen your brothers" (Luke 22:31-32). Jesus tells Peter he will face great temptation. Second, he will not ultimately fail, but will fall away before he returns to Jesus. Afterward, he must help restore others, for they will fail too.

¹ Brown, Death, 2:842

Peter blew Jesus off. He says he's ready to go with Jesus "both to prison and to death." But Jesus knows Peter is not as strong as he thinks: "I tell you the truth, this very night, before the rooster crows, you will deny me three times" (21:33-34).

Peter three denials

After Jesus was arrested in the garden, Peter followed Jesus to the palace of the high priest, who interrogated Jesus. At the door to the courtyard, a *paidiske*, a servant or slave girl, ten or fifteen years old, met him (Mark 15:66). Peter had been so courageous so far. When soldiers came to arrest Jesus, Peter stood to defend Jesus with his sword. As he enters the high priest's courtyard, he will be surrounded by hostile people. We imagine he is ready for a confrontation, even for arrest.

Instead, as Peter warms himself, the servant girl looks at him carefully and says, "You also were with Jesus of Galilee" (14:67). It's not the sharpest challenge and it comes from a girl, not a soldier or official. Peter seems to be caught off guard. He denies it and tries to play dumb, "I don't know or understand what you're talking about" (14:68). He pretends he can't see why she would have such an idea.

Peter still wanted to stay near Jesus, but he decided to move away from this troublesome girl. He drifted toward the entrance to the area, where, Johns says, people talked, milled about, and tried to stay warm by a fire (John 18:18, 25).

But the servant girl saw him again and said to those standing around, "This fellow is one of them." Again he denied it (14:69-70). John 18:25 says others joined in the questioning. Peter had already denied that he is Jesus' disciple once, so it was easy to do it again. Surely Peter didn't expect his first lie to lead to another, but he had started down the path and it was hard to go back. Once we start down the wrong road, it's hard to change course. It's easy to say, "No" and Peter does.

But now people are onto him. "After a little while, those standing near said to Peter, 'Surely you are one of them, for you are a Galilean'" (14:70). People notice local accents. Peter sounded like a Galilean, Jesus was a Galilean, and that was enough. Besides, others had already accused him. John says someone thought he recognized Jesus from the garden, when Peter swung a sword at Jesus' arrest (18:26).

The first time Peter said, "I don't know what you are talking about." This time, Mark says, "He began to call down curses on himself, and he swore to them, 'I don't know this man you're talking about'" (14:71).

The first time Peter said, "I don't understand your topic." This time, he took an oath, called God as witness, and repudiated Jesus. "I don't know this man." Peter's cursing wasn't foul language - rude talk about body functions. He said, "May God curse me if what I say is false. I'm not a disciple. I don't know who Jesus is."

At that moment, "the rooster crowed the second time." Then Peter remembered what Jesus had said, "Before the rooster crows twice, you will disown me three times." Then "he broke down and wept" (14:72). We hope that Peter eventually remembered some of Jesus' first words as well: "Blessed are the poor in spirit... Blessed are those who mourn" when they bring their sin, sorrow to God (Matt 5:3-4).

Peter's failure

Notice that Peter's sins are those of a believer. He had tried to defend Jesus in the garden. He intended to be faithful, he followed Jesus into the courtyard in an effort to be true. And the instinct for self-preservation is strong. So we understand Peter's sin. But it is also repugnant. Peter denies that he knows Jesus at all. Many factors aggravate Peter's sin.

- Peter denied Jesus repeatedly, solemnly, and vehemently.
- Peter failed from a position of leadership among the disciples, and set a bad example for all.
- Peter denied Jesus despite his warning and prediction.
- Peter did this despite his resolve to the contrary. He said, "even if all fall away, I never will." He said he would die first (26:33, 35).

Peter's failure speaks to us. First, Peter lost confidence in Jesus. Jesus said he would die and rise. But Matthew says Peter was now following Jesus "to see the end" (26:58) – how it ended. He had doubts. His confidence in Jesus faltered. Earlier, when Jesus said, "You will all fall away," Peter said, "Not I." Then and now, he believed Jesus could make mistakes.

Second, Peter was self-confident. He told himself he was unique, better than the rest. They may fall away, but he will not. But we are rarely as strong or unique as we think. Peter lost his fear of God; fear of death gripped him. Peter never intended to say, "May I perish if I have any part in Jesus and his work." But panic overwhelmed him and he did say it.

Once I spoke to a Christian leader whose life and ministry collapsed in every way. He lost his family, career, reputation, and friendships. "It was strange," he said, "everything was falling apart. I had advisors, but I told them nothing because I wasn't even telling myself what was happening." Like Peter, he trusted himself.

There is a better way. Jesus told the disciples, "The Spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak." This is true for all of us. We all feel fear or panic or succumb to temptation. Therefore, let's use the means of grace: our friends, Scripture, the Holy Spirit. Peter trusted his own strength. When Jesus said, "Watch and pray," Peter neither watched nor prayed. He was so sure he would pass the test he didn't even seek help. Peter wandered into temptation unprepared and fell.

The point: It's good to admit that we are not so strong - especially if we take our weakness to Jesus and ask him for aid. Peter fell because he was weak and dreamed that he was strong. He shows the folly of self-reliance. Peter shows us how to believe in Jesus and fall on our face. The story would be pure tragedy except for Jesus' mercy on Peter. He wept, but Jesus dried his tears.

2. Judas: A failure of hope (Mark 15:1-2, Matt 27:1-5)

Early in the morning, after the authorities decided to put Jesus to death, "They bound Jesus, led him away, and handed him over to Pilate" (15:1-2). Here Matthew inserts a word about Judas. "When Judas... saw that Jesus was condemned, he was seized with remorse" (27:3). Suddenly Judas realized: his betrayal meant Jesus' death.

Then Judas "was seized with remorse." The typical Greek word for repentance is *metanoeo*. It means to change one's mind or heart. Matthew uses another word of Judas, *metamelomai*. It means to change one's feelings about something. The words are similar and even overlap, but Matthew wants us to see a distinction.

Judas feels sorry. He has regrets and guilt feelings over his actions, but he doesn't repent. He focuses on his act of betrayal. He seeks relief in the temple, as he tries to return the payoff he got for betraying Jesus to the priests. But he never took his grief to the Lord. His feelings changed about what he did. But his heart, the core of his being, did not. He was sad, but he did not see himself as a sinner who needed to repent and turn to God in faith and ask for grace.

When Peter realized what he did, he wept to God and repented. But Judas thought he had to do something about his mistake – to make up for it? So he returned the money "to the chief priests and elders." He said, "I have sinned for I have betrayed innocent blood" (27:3-4). This sounds like repentance, but it isn't.

Judas didn't go to Jesus to make his confession, nor did he go to God. He went to Jesus' enemies.² So he didn't take his sin to the Lord, he took it upon himself. In a vain attempt to atone for his sin and remove his guilt, he returns the "blood money," the thirty silver pieces the priests paid him to betray Jesus.

Ironically, the high priests say they have no interest in Judas' problems. Hours earlier, they paid the same money to purchase information leading to Jesus' death. Now they suddenly develop scruples. They hear Judas' anguish and guilt, and coldly reply, "What is that to us? See to it yourself" (27:4).

This is a callous failure of duty for men who are called to help with cases of remorse and repentance. What a contrast with Jesus, the true high priest, who does everything necessary to remove our guilt. Jesus saw human sin and said, "This is my affair; I will help you." So the priests don't help and Judas doesn't go to Jesus, but Judas is determined to do something. So he "threw the money into the temple and left. Then he went away and hanged himself" (27:5).

Was Judas' suicide an impulsive act or an act of despair? Surely he felt guilt, anger, and despair, but there is more to this next sin. Judas has blood guilt on his mind. The law said, "Cursed is the man who accepts a bribe to kill an innocent person" (Deut 27:25). Judas believes he is under this curse. The priests will not help him. Therefore, another law applies: to remove such blood guilt, the guilty party must die for his crime (Num 35:33-34). Judas took his life "in an anguished attempt to atone for his guilt."³

How tragic! Judas feels terrible, but because he doesn't take his sin to the Lord, he takes it on himself. It's a tragic case of man-made religion, a desperate effort to save oneself. That's what man-made religions do. They try to do something to atone for sin. We can fall into the same mentality: "I'll make up for it! I'll prove myself. Give me time. I'll do penance." A plague on all of it.

Judas and Peter seem to commit similar sins. How did Judas end this way while Peter was forgiven and restored as an apostle? Peter denied Jesus, Judas betrayed Jesus. What is the difference?

First, Peter was caught off guard and panicked while alone, surrounded, and under pressure. He intended to be loyal, not to betray Jesus. Peter's sin was an act of weakness and foolish self-confidence. But Judas volunteered to betray Jesus and negotiated payment for it. This is important, but there is more.

² Brown, Death 641

³ Garland, Matt 254-5

Judas felt sorry for his sin, but Peter repented. Do you grasp the difference. Sorrow says, "Woe is me. I'm so bad." It's self centered. Repentance says, "I have sinned against God and others. Lord have mercy." Judas took his guilt on himself and found death. Peter took his sin to the Lord and found life. I pray that you do as Peter did. Don't look at yourself. Look to Jesus and find his mercy.

3. Pilate: A failure of courage (Mark 15:1-15)

After the Sanhedrin condemned Jesus, they bound Jesus and led him to Pilate, the Roman governor. The priests accused Jesus, stating their charges in political terms, to convince Pilate that Jesus deserved to die. Luke records it, stated in political terms: "He leads nation astray, forbids the payment of taxes, and claims to be Christ, a King" (Luke 23:2 Mark 15:3). Perhaps they think that if they feed Pilate the right information, he will sign off.

But Pilate could see that Jesus was no rebel or warrior and asks Jesus, "Are you the king of the Jews?" Jesus replies: "You say [it]" (Mark 15:2). "You" is emphatic; Pilate says this. Jesus is not king in the sense that Pilate implies in John. Jesus clarifies, "My kingdom is not of this world" (John 18:36). Jesus wouldn't say it if Pilate hadn't asked.

Is Jesus a king? Yes, but not in a political sense. Jesus tells Pilate, "For this I was born... to testify to the truth" (18:37). He is king of truth. When I received my Ph.D., we had a little party. Someone told my 4 year-old, "Your father is a doctor now! What do you think of that?" She considered this a while, then said, "I know what kind of doctor you are, a doctor of truth." Normal concepts of "doctor" didn't apply. Much more, ordinary concepts of "king" don't apply to Jesus. He's the king of truth.

A typical hearing before a Roman procurator included charges, the governor's questions, the prisoner's self-defense, then a verdict. But Jesus didn't defend himself. It was time for his sacrifice. And his accusers had no interest in the truth. Pilate was astonished at Jesus' silence Mark 15:4-5. Somehow, Jesus' silence convinced Pilate that he was innocent. A vigorous self-defense isn't always necessary. Some accusations are simply absurd and don't deserve an answer.

Pilate saw no basis for the charges against Jesus. He saw that "it was out of envy that the chief priests had handed Jesus over to him" (15:10). He realized that Jesus was innocent and that the leaders want to use him to execute Jesus. But Pilate lacked strength to stand on his convictions. He tried to evade responsibility for a decision by making a compromise.

The release of Barabbas.

Pilate laid aside the question of Jesus' innocence and chose to treat him as an ordinary prisoner. Then, acting as if Jesus deserved to be a prisoner, Pilate offered to set him free, for "it was the custom at [Passover] to release a prisoner whom the people requested" as a token of good will (15:6).

There were two options: Jesus and "a man called Barabbas." He was in prison after committing murder in a recent insurrection (15:7). When the crowd came to ask Pilate for the annual pardon, Pilate quickly proposed Jesus. "Do you want me to release to you the king of the Jews?" (15:9).

But the chief priests prompted the crowd to ask for Barabbas (15:11). Matthew calls Barabbas a prominent prisoner (27:16). He and two others had been captured. By tradition, we say Jesus was crucified between two thieves, but these were rebels, murderers. The three crosses were intended for Barabbas and his cohorts. So Jesus took Barabbas' place. Much more, we hope that he takes *our* place.

Pilate hoped they would choose Jesus. He believed Jesus was innocent and popular. He knew that the Jewish leaders wanted to manipulate him and he hated that. He knew Jesus was no threat to Rome and that Barabbas was. His wife even had a troubling dream about Jesus. But the crowd asked Pilate to release Barabbas (15:11).

Pilate said, consider the consequences! "What shall I do then with the one you call king of the Jews?" The law said Jesus could be banished. But the crowd howled, "Crucify him." Pilate protested, "Why, what crime has he committed?" Why should an innocent man suffer this fate? "But they shouted all the more "Crucify him" (15:12-14).

Crucifixion fit the goal of the priests. They want to kill Jesus – and discredit him too. For the law says, "anyone who is hung on a tree is under God's curse" (Deut 21:23). Yet their wicked plans fulfilled the Father's purposes. By this death Jesus fulfills God's purpose and bore the curse for us.

Pilate could see that the mob was getting unruly, so he decided to satisfy the crowd instead of doing his job – doing justice for Jesus. He saw "that a riot was beginning and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, "I am innocent of this man's blood" (27:24). He meant, "Do what you will, I'm not responsible." Not so fast! As governor, Pilate is responsible, whether he admits it or not. We can't eradicate our guilt by saying, "I'm innocent" or "take care of your own problems." The gesture is postposterous, but it's a window into Pilate's soul, and every soul.

Pilate is a miserable figure. He hates to kill an innocent man, hates the way the Jews push him around. He is afraid too. Could this man be a son of God? But it's hard to sympathize with Pilate. He blusters and postures as cowards often do. He tries to intimidate Jesus: "Do you not know that I have power to release you, and power to crucify you?" (John 19:7-10).

An encounter with Jesus reveals what is in the heart. Pilate learns that he is not as strong as he thinks. He lives for power - to advance in rank or at least retain his rank. His career is his god; he will not risk it for the sake of a Galilean peasant! If powerful interests seek his death, then he will die. Pilate will take no risks and everyone knows it.

The priests can manipulate Pilate because they know his weakness. Pilate tells Jesus he has power to release him, but he is wrong. His desire for power robbed him of the power to do good with his power. His love of power rendered him powerless. So Pilate is a pathetic figure, cornered in his own palace, unable to resist the call for Jesus' execution. His career had rocky moments recently. One more blunder could mean ruin. Political power was Pilate's god. It made him weak and a coward, for he was afraid to risk the loss of his precious god. This is true of all false gods; they don't make us strong, they make us weak. Fear of losing them enslaves us.

When we meet Jesus, it forces decisions. Jesus was free to be brave because he simply wanted to serve God. Pilate's love of power weakened him. His false love betrayed him. We become brave and principled when we stop making so many decisions on the basis of questions such as, "What might I lose?" or "What will people think?" and make decisions by asking "Does this serve God and neighbor?" Pilate believed he needed to retain power at any cost; the cost was his soul.

False gods enslave. Pilate turned to politics for meaning. He turned to his power to save his power. Yet the more he clung to power, the less he could use it. He ordered the death of Jesus because power said

he had to. His desire for power made him weak and cowardly. False gods will do the same for us. Pilate warns us. Our strongest desires can enslave us.

By contrast, Jesus was courageous because he knew he trusted the Father and knew his goals. He was willing to lose many things because he entrusted himself to the Father. So he persevered and reached his goal – and shows us the source of courage.

4. Jesus: The answer to our failures (John 21)

So we have three failures – Peter, Judas and Pilate. But only one of them, Peter, saw Jesus again. After Jesus died, he rose again, for death could not hold him. It took the disciples time to grasp the meaning of Jesus' death and resurrection. For a while Peter and others returned to fishing. Jesus met them after a night of fishing.

Jesus questioned Peter: "Simon, do you truly love me more than these?" That is, more than "these" other disciples love him? A few days earlier, he had said "Though all betray you, I will not." He knows better now. So he does not say, "I love you more," he simply says "I love you."

Jesus asked Peter three times: "Do you love me?" It hurt Peter that Jesus asked him the same question three times. But Jesus meant no harm. Peter denied Jesus three times. Now these three questions allow Peter to affirm three times, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." Hearing this confession, Jesus forgave Peter and reinstated him as an apostle.

I must ask: where do you fit in this story? We all sin, but what have you done with your sin? Have you acted like Judas, Pilate, or Peter?

Judas took his sorrows on himself. We know where it led. Let's not try to atone for our past sins. Take it to the Lord.

Pilate was a slave to his god – power – and it made him weak. Have you taken time to consider what your god might be? The thing you must have, or you will be lost, life meaningless? Identify it. Dethrone it. Grow strong. Like Peter take your sin and sorrow to Jesus. Be forgiven and restored. No more sorrow!