

## **THE DANGERS OF DISTANT DISCIPLESHIP** **(Matthew 26:58, 69-75)**

This past Thursday evening, the day after Veteran's Day, I went to an event that honored our veteran's. It was put on by the American Heritage Girls, which I liken to a Christian version of the Girl Scouts. At this ceremony, three veterans formed a panel, and they were asked various questions about their service.

One of the questions they were asked was, "What was the scariest experience you had while you served?"

After the ceremony, I was talking to a couple of friends, one of whom retired from service in the Army. For many years, he was a combat soldier. I told him that I would like to have heard his responses to some of those questions. My other friend voiced the question I had been thinking. He asked, "What was your scariest experience?"

His answer surprised me. He said, "I don't get scared." He said, "When I face a crisis situation, I just work methodically through it."

There are not many people who can honestly say they don't get scared. My friend is one who can. His experience, training, and personality are such that fear is not a factor.

For most people, fear is a factor. Regardless of whether or not you feel fear, danger is a reality. This morning I want to focus your attention on some very real and potential dangers.

I am going to do something I rarely do, and I never knowingly do it. In fact, if I hear other preachers or Bible teachers do it, I think less of them for it. Today, I am going to take a verse out of context; so, at least give me credit for confessing it before I do it.

The verse is Matthew 26:58. Before I read it, let me tell you something about the verse. The verse tells us what Peter did after the mob arrested Jesus. When we put all four gospel accounts together, we see that all but two of the disciples scattered at that moment. Peter and one other disciple, very likely John, followed the mob. They hung back to see where Jesus was taken. Let's read our verse: "Peter was following Him at a distance."

I want you to think about those words: "Peter followed Jesus at a distance." This verse is not about discipleship. I freely admit that, but I want you to think about distant discipleship. Have you ever attempted to follow Jesus but from a distance?

- Distant disciples are those who say they follow Jesus, but they don't read His word.
- Distant disciples are those who say they follow Jesus, but they don't spent time with Him in prayer.
- Distant disciples are those who say they follow Jesus, but they shy away from telling others about Jesus.
- Distant disciples are those who say they follow Jesus, but they don't long to spend time fellowshiping and worshipping with other believers.

Distant discipleship is a problem in the church of Jesus Christ, especially in the United States. It is a problem even in Enid, OK and even at Liberty Southern Baptist

Church.

One of the problematic things about distant discipleship is that it is dangerous. It is dangerous for those who are distant disciples, but it is also dangerous for others, as well.

Much earlier in the Book of Matthew, Jesus said that His followers are the salt of the earth, but distant disciples have lost their saltiness. Jesus said that His followers are the light of the world, but distant disciples have hidden their light under a bushel basket, so to speak. Distant disciples fail to have a positive influence upon the culture in which they live.

The ultimate responsibility for every societal ill that plagues our nation can be laid at the feet of Christ's church because, by and large, we have shirked our responsibility to be salt and light in our culture. We have settled for being disciples who follow Jesus at a distance.

We are going to look at some thoughts that emerge from several verses that come before v. 58, and then we are going to examine vv. 69-75. Let me go ahead and read that passage. I will try not to take any of those verses out of context.

### **Becoming a Distant Disciple Is Dangerous**

Don't you find it amazing that while Peter was not afraid of brawny soldiers bearing swords, he did back down, and he backed away because of a little, servant girl who recognized him as having been with Jesus?

Peter's sudden lack of bravery did not happen suddenly. A couple of things fed into Peter's loss of courage.

#### *1. Distant Discipleship Is Caused by Trusting the Flesh.*

Whenever we begin to rely on our own abilities to see us through, we are going to reveal that in what we say and what we do. Our words and actions will betray where our trust lies.

Just before Jesus prayed in the garden, He warned His disciples that they were all going to fall away because of Him. Peter boasted, "Not me, Lord, not me. Those others might, but I'm Peter, the rock; I'm gonna stand strong."

Jesus replies, "Oh, Peter. Before morning light, before the rooster crows, you are going to deny Me, not once, not twice, but three times."

Peter argues, "Nope. Nope. I will die with You before that happens." Peter was trusting in His own strength.

In the second verse of his hymn, "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God," Martin Luther wrote, "Did we in our own strength confide, our striving would be losing . . ."

Peter was fighting a losing battle because he was waging it in his own strength.

Peter made it clear that he was trusting in the flesh by what said, but also by what he did. As soon as the authorities laid their hands on Jesus, Peter went into action. He drew his sword and started fighting. According to Luke's account, an unnamed disciple asked Jesus, "Shall we strike with the sword" (Luke 22:49). Peter didn't wait for an answer. He just started hacking away.

Whenever you undertake things in the Lord's name without waiting on a word from the Lord, you are acting in the flesh. You are showing yourself to be a distant disciple.

Jesus said in John 15:5, "Apart from Me, you can do nothing." The truth is we can do lots of things without Jesus. You can raise a family without Jesus. You can go to work every day and have a successful career without Jesus. You can live a relatively good, clean life and be well-respected without Jesus. What you can't do is, you can't live a life that pleases God and brings Him glory apart from Jesus.

Are you depending on the Lord, relying on Him, seeking His wisdom and His guidance as you make decisions and as you discharge your responsibilities? In James 4:8 we find both a command and a promise. James calls upon us to draw close to Him, and it assures that if we will draw close to Him, He will draw close to us.

Don't try to follow Jesus from a distance. Draw close to Him. Let Him guide what you do and don't do.

We find a second dangerous thing that goes into making a distant disciple.

## 2. *Distant Discipleship Is Caused by a Lack of Prayer.*

After vowing to be there for Jesus, Peter, along with James and John were asked by Jesus to watch with Him. In other words, Jesus asked them to pray. Jesus went a little further into the garden and prayed earnestly to His Father. When Jesus returned to the three, He found them sound asleep. Jesus said to them, "Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak" (Matthew 26:41). Jesus went off again, when He returned a second and third time, all three, including Peter, were asleep.

There is no point to march into enemy territory if you are not prayed up, and Peter was anything other than prayed up.

There is another man named Peter who lives in our day. He is Peter Kreeft. He was a professor at Boston College, and has authored over 80 books. Twenty years ago, he released a book entitled, *Prayer for Beginners*. In that book, he wrote:

Nothing else can ever cure our sick world except saints, and saints are never made except by prayer.

Nothing but saints can save our world because the deepest root of all the world's diseases is sin, and saints are the antibodies that fight sin.

Nothing but prayer can make saints because nothing but God can make saints, and we meet God in prayer. Prayer is the hospital where we meet Doctor God.

Satan can't keep you from becoming a Christian, but he will do everything he can to keep you from a close walk with Christ. He will try to get you to follow Jesus from a distance. To that end, he will attempt to get you to fall into fleshliness and prayerlessness, two great enemies to close, Christian discipleship. Ask God to protect you from those dangers.

Not only is becoming a distant disciple dangerous . . .

## Being a Distant Disciple Is Dangerous

In vv. 69-75, I detect three things that distant discipleship will do to us, and all three are dangerous.

### 1. *Distant Discipleship Puts Us in the Wrong Place.*

Peter did not need to be where he was. He was in the enemy's camp, and there was nothing he could do to help Jesus. Jesus was where He was by God's design. Peter was where he was by Peter's design, and he didn't have the strength to be where he was.

I think it is great when Christians go into hostile places to witness, when they invade Satan's territory. Jesus told us that the gates of hell will not prevail against His church. That means we need to march into enemy territory to win the victory. That being said, it is not wise for a recovering alcoholic to go to the bar to witness. It is not a good idea for a gambling addict to go to the casino to share Christ with people while they are gambling and he is looking on. It is not wise for a sex addict to go into the red-light district to share his testimony.

Some might congratulate Peter for his bravery. He walked right into the enemy camp. I would have to say, however, that there is a fine line between bravery and stupidity. If you draw your sword and injure the servant of the high priest, and then walk into the courtyard of the high priest where guards are stationed, just maybe the same guards who came to arrest Jesus, and you tried to prevent them from succeeding in their mission, you might think you are being brave. I would argue, "You are being stupid."

Jesus said, "Be wise as serpents and harmless as doves."

Before you go anywhere, make sure Jesus is leading you.

### 2. *Distant Discipleship Robs Us of a Bold Witness.*

Even though Peter was not where he needed to be, he had three chances to make the best out of his situation. When that servant girl said to him, "Didn't I see you with this Jesus?", he could have said, "You probably did. He and I are good friends, very good friends. Let me tell you about Him."

I looked up the word *bold* to see how it is used in the NT. The words *bold*, *boldly*, and *boldness* are used 11 times in the Book of Acts. Of the 11 times it is used, 10 times it is preceded by a word such as *speaking* or *preaching*. Boldness is needed to speak the word of God without apology and without compromise.

In Acts 4:29, we are told that those of the early church prayed, "Grant to your servants to continue to speak Your word with all boldness." Two verses later we read: "And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness."

When you pray that God will give you boldness to speak His word, that is a prayer He will gladly answer with a resounding "yes."

I mentioned that there is only one time out of the ten times that *boldness* is not

specifically coupled with the act of speaking God's message. This instance is also found in Acts 4. Let me read to you v. 13. "Now when they (*They* would be the rulers, elders, and scribes; this would be the same group of people we met last Sunday morning who held a mockery of a trial and condemned Jesus to death) saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated, common men, they were astonished. And they recognized that they had been with Jesus" (Acts 4:31).

A little servant girl recognized that Peter had been with Jesus, and he possessed no boldness at all. Now, Peter stands before men who have the power to imprison him or worse, and his boldness knows no bounds. What is it that makes the difference? The difference is that the Spirit of God now resides within the hearts and minds of Peter, John, and the followers of Jesus. Instead of following Jesus at a distance, the Spirit of God has brought them into close fellowship with Jesus, and they are impelled to speak out on His behalf.

Are you allowing the Spirit of God to draw you close to your Savior? If you will do that, He will loose your tongue and give you boldness.

Jesus promised His first disciples, "Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men" (Matthew 4:19). That promise still applies to you and me. If we are not fishers of men, it is for one of two reasons. Either, Jesus lied or we are not doing a very good job of following Jesus. Which do you think it is?

There is a third danger to being a distant disciple.

### *3. Distant Discipleship Gets Us to Deny Our Lord.*

When given the opportunity to speak out on behalf of Jesus, it would have been bad enough for Peter to have simply remained silent. What he did, however, was much worse. He denied, in no uncertain terms, that he even knew Jesus. In fact, it got worse with each denial. First, he pretended ignorance. "I don't know what you are talking about." The second time, he included an oath. Finally, he cursed and swore.

According to Luke's account, two things happened. First, the rooster crowed as Peter was making that third denial, and then he says, "The Lord turned and looked at Peter."

Can you imagine what is going on in the mind and heart of Peter? As soon as the rooster crows, he remembers what Jesus warned would happen, and he remembers his proud protestation, "No, not me, Lord, not me." Then, to make matters worse, Jesus looks at him. Peter looks up, and he sees Jesus looking straight at him. We are not told what kind of look it was. I don't think it was an angry look, or a hurt look, or a stern look. I think it may have been a compassionate look. It may have been a look that said, "I know, Peter, but it's going to be okay. I still love you."

When you and I fail your Lord, and we will, when we do what we never thought we would do, look up. In our mind's eye, we need to see Jesus looking at us. What is His look communicating? With that look of love, He just might be saying, "I know, but I still love you, and it's going to be OK."

So far, we have looked at the danger of becoming a distant disciple and the danger of being a distant disciple. There is one more thing I would like you to consider.

## Beating Distant Discipleship Makes You Dangerous

As long as Peter was following Jesus at a distance, he was no threat to Satan. In fact, he was falling right into Satan's traps. But when he realized what he had done, and when he saw Jesus looking at him, his heart broke. Our text says that he "wept bitterly." These were not just tears of regret and tears of remorse. They were also tears of repentance.

If we were to take the time, we could go to John 21 and see how Jesus recommissioned Peter, so to speak. Peter denied Jesus three times, and three times, Jesus asked Peter, "Do you love Me?" Each time Peter affirmed his love for Jesus, Jesus said, "Feed My lambs. Tend My sheep. Feed My sheep, Peter." We show our love for our Lord by ministering to those who belong to the Lord.

The closer we draw to Christ, the more dangerous we become to the enemy of our souls. Conversely, the farther we stray from the Lord, the more aid and comfort we give to the enemy. So, draw close; stay close to Christ.

I close with a quote and a story. First, the quote. It comes from the author Garrison Keillor. In 2007, *Newsweek* magazine asked Keillor to choose what he considered to be the five most important books ever written. To the surprise of many readers, he ranked the Book of Acts at the top of his list. Keillor offered this concise but powerful summary of the book: "The flames lit on their little heads and bravely and dangerously went they onward." Those fledgling followers of Jesus didn't just encounter danger; they were dangerous.

In his book, *Seizing Your Divine Moment*, Erwin McManus wrote:

One summer Aaron [his son] went to a youth camp. He was just a little guy, and I was kind of glad because it was a church camp. I figured he wasn't going to hear all those ghost stories . . . But unfortunately, since it was a Christian camp and they didn't tell ghost stories, because we don't believe in ghosts, they told demon and Satan stories instead. And so, when Aaron got home, he was terrified.

"Dad, don't turn off the light!" he said before going to bed. "No, Daddy, could you stay here with me? Daddy, I'm afraid. They told all these stories about demons."

And I wanted to say, "They're not real."

He goes, "Daddy, Daddy, would you pray for me that I would be safe?" I could feel it. I could feel warm-blanket Christianity beginning to wrap around him, a life of safety, safety, safety.

I said, "Aaron, I will not pray for you to be safe. I will pray that God will make you dangerous, so dangerous that demons will flee when you enter the room."

And he goes, "All right. But pray I would be really, really dangerous, Daddy."

McManus ends his story by asking, "Have you come to that place in your own life where you stop asking God to give you a safe life, and make you a dangerous follower of Jesus Christ?"

Which are you going to be—a distant follower of Jesus or a dangerous follower?