

Midweek 2

“Satan Has Asked to Sift You Like Wheat”

Sermon Text: Luke 22:31,32

*“Christ, the Life of all the living, Christ, the death of death, our foe,
Who, Thyself for me once giving to the darkest depths of woe,
Through Thy suff'rings, death, and merit I eternal life inherit:
Thousand, thousand thanks shall be, Dearest Jesus, unto Thee. (TLH 151)*

Dear Fellow Christians, you are, in all likelihood, familiar with the expression “*ulterior motives.*” While the expression itself is neutral, it has taken on a decidedly negative flavor. There is now a sinister implication attached to the expression. The expression’s original and most basic meaning was that someone had a goal in mind that was not readily apparent. That goal may have been good or bad, positive or negative. An acquaintance once told of how, as a young man growing up on a farm, he once stayed out all night with his friends in defiance of his parents’ curfew. When he slunk back home at 5 in the morning, he found his father sitting at the kitchen table drinking coffee. Without a word concerning the boy’s actions, the father just announced that it was time to start the workday, and he worked non-stop and in silence beside the young man the entire day. Hard. Clearly the father had an ulterior motive, which was to demonstrate to his son not only that actions have consequences, but that foolish actions often have rather painful consequences.

Ulterior motives can be either positive or negative. In fact, a single course of action can have *both* a positive and negative ulterior motive, depending on the perspective of those connected to that action. This is often true when our God involves himself with the actions of man and devil. What the forces of wickedness intend for evil, God intends for the good of his children.

Our study this evening focuses on one such example, found recorded in the 22nd Chapter of Luke’s Gospel:

ESV(Luke 22:31-32) “Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, ³² but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned again, strengthen your brothers.”

This is God’s Word. ***“Sanctify us by your truth, O Lord. Your Word is truth. Amen.”***

While it *can be* true that “*familiarity breeds contempt,*” it is *undoubtedly* true that familiarity can breed daydreaming. We have heard the Passion history so many times that we no longer really hear it. Knowing what each person is going to say and do, the temptation is strong to listen to the words with our brains firmly shifted into park.

This evening, for example, when Jesus says to Peter, ***“Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat,”*** you already know what Jesus is going to say next. Imagine instead this evening that you are hearing this account for the first time. What would you actually have expected to hear? ***“Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift all of you as wheat. But . . .”*** What?

Before we answer that, we need to set the stage by taking a closer look at what Jesus has said so far.

Jesus began with ***“Simon, Simon...”*** The Bible uses repetition to indicate something serious. It’s like when Jesus would say ***“Verily, verily”*** in the King James Version or ***“Truly, truly”*** in other translations. Jesus wants Peter to listen, to take him seriously.

“Satan has asked.” This can be a bit disconcerting if you stop to think about it—Satan asking God for permission to tempt someone. It wasn’t unique. We saw the same thing in the Old Testament when Satan asked God for permission to torment Job. Satan’s goal was to prove that Job’s faith was shallow, that it was based on the fact that God had blessed him so greatly. His contention was that Job’s faith would fail if afflicted (Job 1:6-13; 2:1-6).

“To sift you like wheat.” Living where we do, we get that wheat has to be separated from the chaff when it is harvested. The process for doing this has changed dramatically over the years. Today combines do most of the sifting. Other machines do the final cleaning. Years ago there was none of that, of course, so all had to be done by hand. One method was winnowing, which involved tossing the wheat into the air and relying on the wind to carry away the lighter chaff.

That’s not what Satan was asking to do to Peter. What Satan wanted to do was sifting – the process of putting the grain into a sieve and shaking it violently to separate the wheat from the chaff. Satan’s goal was to shake Peter so violently that his faith would be shaken loose from his soul. Satan wanted to shake Peter so violently that his connection to his Savior would be broken. Whether successful or not, for Peter this sifting was going to be a painful, violent experience.

With this background, we’re ready to return to the scenario we discussed earlier. If you were hearing this account for the first time, what would you have expected to hear Jesus say? Probably something like *“Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you like wheat. But, of course, I’m never going to let him do that. I’m going to make this whole evening as easy as possible for all of you. I’m going to shelter you from so severe a trial. I denied Satan’s request.”*

Obviously that’s *not* what Jesus said. We know from what happened later that night in the courtyard of the high priest that Jesus allowed Satan to shake Peter violently.

Had we never heard this account before, we might also have imagined that Jesus might have said something like, *“Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you like wheat. And I’m going to let him, but only because I know you are strong enough to beat him. I’m going to let him sift you because I know you’re going to win.”*

That’s not what happened either. The night ended with Peter running out of the courtyard into the darkness, where he stopped, violently shaken and weeping bitterly. Satan had shaken from him not one, not two, but three separate denials of his Lord and Savior - the same Lord that Peter had proudly proclaimed he would never leave, much less deny. Peter had been so certain, so confident in himself. Maybe all the other disciples had such a weak bond with Jesus that they could easily be shaken loose from Jesus, never Peter.

Why did Jesus allow Peter to go through this? Satan’s plan – his ulterior motive – was to destroy Jesus’ disciples. All of them. The first two instances of **“you”** in our text are plural. **“Satan demanded to have you** (plural), **that he might sift you** (plural) **like wheat.”** The devil wanted to sift *all* of Jesus’ disciples. He wanted to destroy all of them. But then Jesus addresses Peter individually when he says, **“But I have prayed for you** (singular) **that your faith may not fail. And when you** (singular) **have turned again, strengthen your brothers.”**

Jesus’ plan, his positive ulterior motive, was not only to defeat the devil but to provide something for Peter that he absolutely needed to gain. His gracious plan involved allowing Peter not only to be shaken violently in the darkness that night but also to fail.

Peter needed this. He needed to be humbled. He needed to fail – *because of his strong faith*. Peter’s faith was strong, but his faith was in himself. He trusted in his own strength, his own resolve and determination. He needed to learn that his own strength was really just an illusion, a figment of his proud imagination. He needed to learn to stop looking to himself as his source for strength and instead to trust his Savior.

As always, we need to apply this. This is an account of what happened to Peter, but it was recorded and preserved so that you and I might learn. Have you ever felt like Peter as you witnessed the failure of others? Maybe it was the spectacular collapse of a celebrity, or the sin of a fellow Christian. You shake your head with what was supposed to look like sadness but really more like, “*Well I never! And would never!*”

Then maybe Satan grabbed you and shook *you*, violently, and you committed a sin that was so great, so *evil* that you were shocked by it. You were both amazed and appalled that you could be shaken so violently and so effectively by Satan.

If so, know that God’s plan for you was the same as his loving plan for Peter. Now, weeping bitterly in the darkness outside the courtyard, you are much closer to knowing yourself as you truly are – a sinner who is helpless to defeat the devil with your own strength, a sheep who is defenseless against the one the Bible says “***prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour***” (1 Peter 5:8).

Yet we dare not miss the bigger picture here. There’s no real benefit in knowing this about ourselves unless we know about the other sifting attempted that night. Without knowing that other sifting, the knowledge of our own weakness brings only despair and hopelessness.

Peter was not Satan’s primary target that night. What the devil really wanted was to sift Jesus like wheat and to destroy him by separating him from his Father. He wanted to get Jesus to separate himself, even for a moment, from his perfect walk of obedience. The sifting Satan carried out through a servant girl and a few bystanders was nothing compared to Satan’s assault on Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. He shook Jesus so violently that Jesus’ sweat became like great drops of blood. Satan shook Jesus with a violence beyond what we can even imagine, all the while telling him that it would be easier just to let go, to give in, to simply quit.

While Peter failed, Jesus did not. This is our comfort, our hope, the heart of our Christian faith – to know that while we fail, Jesus never did. When Satan attempts to sift you, to shake your faith by telling you that your sins are unforgivable and will condemn you to hell, you can say with unshakeable certainty that your sins are forgiven through Christ and your faith rests in him alone.

When you say that, Jesus’ prayer for Peter has been answered for you too. While Jesus didn’t pray that Peter would not be shaken and sifted, he *did* pray that Peter’s faith would not fail. We know from reading the books of Acts and 1 Peter and 2 Peter that Jesus’ prayer was answered. In fact, Jesus used that sifting to separate Peter from the pride that endangered his soul. He used Satan’s sifting to strengthen Peter’s faith, to cleanse it of impurities. The result was exactly what Jesus said last in our text: “***And when you have turned again, strengthen your brothers.***” Purged of his baseless pride, Peter became an invaluable source of strength and comfort for all of the Christians who followed after.

God wants the same for you and me. If God allows us to be sifted, he can not only be trusted to provide the strength to survive, know that he will thereby separate us from the evil with which we have entangled ourselves. We will not be separated from him, he will draw us ever closer. And we, in turn, will be better equipped to serve him as a result. Amen.