

The Lessons of Lent – Bad Company

Our study this Lenten season involves studying the mistakes we identify during our reading of our Lord's Passion and learning from them. The goal for Christians is not to go through life hoping to "never make the same mistake twice." It is to never make the same mistake once.

God's Word was not only preserved down through the ages and delivered intact to us, it was preserved and delivered for a reason. It is designed to serve as a vaccine, not just a treatment. It is designed, in other words, to *prevent* mistakes, to prevent falling into temptation and making bad decisions. That that is the goal becomes obvious when you stop to consider that we really don't need a warning if our goal in life is simply to learn from our mistakes and to never make the same mistake twice. Life itself, together with our own natural stupidity, would provide those lessons. Our merciful, loving, Heavenly Father warns us in advance not only so that we learn to avoid sin but to save us from ourselves. Life is hard, it's harder when we're stupid. The height of stupidity is refusing to listen to the warning and take to heart the lessons that our God offers to us in his Word.

That is therefore the goal of our midweek services this Lenten season – to learn the easy way from what others learned the hard way.

We find our second lesson in the 14th Chapter of Mark's Gospel: ^{ESV}(**Mark 14:53-54**) ***And they led Jesus to the high priest. And all the chief priests and the elders and the scribes came together. ⁵⁴ And Peter had followed him at a distance, right into the courtyard of the high priest. And he was sitting with the guards and warming himself at the fire.***

This is God's Word. We ask God the Holy Spirit to open our minds to understand and our hearts to believe all that he here desires to teach us as we pray, "**Sanctify us in the truth, O Lord. Your Word is truth!**" Amen.

As we progress through the season of Lent, we are obviously dealing with the most serious subject matter imaginable. It is the account of how humanity's Savior, true God in human form, was arrested, tried, falsely convicted, and sentenced to what was arguably the most barbaric form of execution the world of that day had to offer.

That's the "forest," the big picture. But that doesn't mean we should ignore the individual "trees" that are revealed along the way. That's an easy mistake to make, since the common warning is to not "miss the forest for the trees." So also this Lenten season we are taking the time to examine more carefully the individual "trees" – the less obvious lessons we are also here taught.

Many of you are familiar with the Apostle Paul's warning in 1 Corinthians 15:33: ***Do not be deceived: "Bad company ruins good morals."*** Paul, writing to Greek converts in Corinth, is borrowing a quote from a *secular Greek* writer. In other words, Paul is telling them that even non-Christians are aware of the incontrovertible truth that each of us tends to adopt the morality (or immorality) of those with whom we surround ourselves. Even just a moment of honest introspection will confirm that truth in your own life. From little on we are all natural mimics. We ape those with whom we surround ourselves. Young people who hang out with those who smoke, drink, or do drugs are infinitely more likely to do the same. Surround yourself with those who use bad language and those words inevitably find their way into your own vocabulary.

But these are just the most obvious manifestations of what Paul was talking about. Entire life-philosophies and worldviews are affected. Surround yourself with rebellious and disobedient friends and you can fully expect to adopt their attitudes. Surround yourself with liars and you will adapt and adopt. Populate your world with the sexually immoral (which was the specific problem Paul was addressing in Corinth) and you will find yourself wading into the filth with them.

In our short text for this evening, not one but two mistakes are revealed. Most can identify the most obvious mistake that Peter made. It takes a bit more careful reading to identify the second.

The more obvious mistake that Peter made was identified in our text with these words: **And he (Peter) was sitting with the guards and warming himself at the fire.** Peter had, in other words, “surrounded himself with bad company.” There is no doubt in my mind that Peter entered that courtyard with absolute confidence that “he could handle it.” I also have no doubt that, if he considered his actions at all, he would have reasoned that what he was doing was brave and commendable. He had, after all, boasted before Jesus and all his fellow disciples **“Though they all fall away because of you, I will never fall away,”** and, **“Even if I must die with you, I will not deny you!”**^{ESV}(Matthew 26:33-35)

Peter might be excused, even commended, for bravely entering the lion’s den of Pilate’s courtyard but for one thing: Jesus had warned him that he wouldn’t be able to handle it. **Jesus said to him, “Truly, I tell you, this very night, before the rooster crows, you will deny me three times.”**^{ESV}(Matthew 26:34) It is the height of both arrogance and foolishness to ignore any divine warning.

Note too that Peter didn’t just lurk in a dark corner of the courtyard. He sat down with the guards and took comfort from their fire. Compare this to what we are told in Psalm 1:1: **Blessed is the man who walks not in the council of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers.** There is a progression there that we ignore to our own peril – walks, stands, sits. That progression indicates an ever more dangerous level of association, and Peter made that exact progression – he walked into the courtyard, he stood for a time among them, and then he sat down with them. Peter thus made himself comfortable in that with which he should have been the least comfortable. Not surprisingly, it was more than he could handle.

It is interesting, by the way, that there was another disciple that also bravely entered that **“counsel of the wicked”** but of whom we hear nothing further.^{ESV}(John 18:15-16) **Simon Peter followed Jesus, and so did another disciple. Since that disciple was known to the high priest, he entered with Jesus into the courtyard of the high priest, ¹⁶ but Peter stood outside at the door. So the other disciple, who was known to the high priest, went out and spoke to the servant girl who kept watch at the door, and brought Peter in.** Though we are not told the identify of this other disciple (most believe it was John, who never mentioned his own name in his Gospel) we do know that another Christian was also present, and there is no mention of that disciple denying his Lord. What, if anything, are we to learn from this? Are we, for example, to assume that this teaches us that we have a 50/50 shot at surviving poor decisions? Or that associating with the wrong crowd can be acceptable for some? Or that it’s really not the bad company we keep but how we deal with them?

I don’t believe any of that was intended. Peter obviously knew that this fellow-Christian was there, since it was that disciple that **“brought Peter in.”** And since the Bible makes no mention that he did, we can assume that the other disciple *didn’t* deny Jesus. What *is* telling is that all of the Gospel accounts tell us that Peter chose to wait (to associate) not with his brother in Christ

but with Jesus' enemies. In other words, even in that pit of vipers, Peter had options that he refused.

Peter learned the hard way that bad company does not always announce itself loudly. Sometimes it simply offers warmth, comfort, and acceptance, but always at the price of loyalty to Jesus. Bad company does more than surround us. It shapes us. Peter's denial didn't start with words. It started with location, with association.

As mentioned earlier, there is more than one lesson taught in our text – one fairly obvious, and one less so. The more obvious lesson is the danger of surrounding yourself with bad company. Did you notice the other? Easy to miss if we don't read carefully and, just as carefully, personally apply what we read.

Hear again the words of our text: ***And they led Jesus to the high priest. And all the chief priests and the elders and the scribes came together. 54 And Peter had followed him at a distance...*** Peter's problem was not just who he had attached himself *to*, it was who he had distanced himself *from*. Obviously, the literal meaning of ***“followed him at a distance”*** was a reference to geographical or physical distance, but there is also a metaphorical truth in these words that applied to what was going on with Peter.

Peter didn't completely abandon Jesus. He still cared. He still followed. But it was *at a distance*. The physical distance wasn't the problem. That distance was probably wise. It was certainly safer. It was the apparent *spiritual* distance that was the problem. Peter had drifted from reliance on his Lord to reliance on himself. That spiritual distance left him vulnerable.

The application of all of this is, I'm sure, obvious. You've probably experienced for yourself how bad company has corrupted your good morals. It happens even without conscious thought. While it's not always possible to separate entirely from the world, it is foolish to imagine that there are never options. Some exposure is inevitable, since we are to be ***“in the world but not of the world”*** but that doesn't mean *all* exposure is unavoidable. Seek out and surround yourself with the other disciples in your world. Above all, don't allow any distance at all between your heart and your Savior Jesus through neglect of the Word and prayer. Whenever we do, we too make ourselves vulnerable.

God's Word always advocates for no distance at all between us and our Savior. Psalm 105:4: ***Seek the LORD and his strength; seek his presence continually!*** Jesus himself in his High Priestly prayer: ***“I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, 21 that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. 22 The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, 23 I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me.”***^{ESV}(John 17:20-23)

Our Savior wants no distance at all between himself and his beloved children. When that connection is close, continual, and strong we will find it that much easier to identify and separate ourselves from the evil that would destroy us.

To that end we pray: *Keep us, Lord, ever enfolded in your arms. Guard our hearts from the influence of ungodly company. Give us courage to stand close even when it costs us comfort. Restore us where we have drifted, and help us to walk in faithfulness until you call us home. Amen.*