

THE WARNING OF FALLING AWAY

People of God, Last week we saw that we have been anointed for burial with Jesus, and we are also surrounded on all sides by betrayers, by the powers that be, and by Judas'.

But much to our surprise, we discover in this week's section, that we ourselves might also betray Jesus. Notice, Jesus says, "*One of you will betray me, one who is eating with me.*" But they are all eating with him. The disciples then ask in the sorrow of our hearts, "*Is it I?*" "Is it I, Lord? Will I be the one who betrays you?" None of them knew. This is a sobering reality, that not one of them knew who it was going to be.

Yes, we know that Judas already betrayed Jesus, but Mark shows that none of the disciples knew who it was that was going to betray him. In fact, everyone questioned whether it was going to be himself. Everyone of them questioned. They were all dipping bread in the dish with Jesus, so none of them knew who it was going to be.

And so, after the supper, Jesus tells them again, "*You all will fall away.*" And then Peter says, "*Even though they all fall away, I will not.*" And Jesus says, "*Truly I say to you, this very night, before the rooster crows twice, you will deny me three times.*" But he said emphatically, "*If I must die with you, I will not deny you.*" And they all said the same."

What can we learn from these things?

THE REALITY OF APOSTASY

First of all, Apostasy is real, People of God. The doctrine of once saved always saved is not a helpful doctrine, for it has lead many to believe that by professing one time in Jesus, they never had to persevere in the faith, and so, by their consciences being seared through the hardness of their hearts, many have fallen away.

But you say, but Pastor, I thought you believed in the sovereignty of God? Yes, indeed, God is sovereign, and He has chosen before the world began in Christ those who are to be saved. But God in His sovereignty also ordains Man to be a Free Moral agent. Man is responsible for His actions, even though God is in control of all things.

Notice, Jesus says of the one who was going to betray him, *“For the Son of Man goes as it was written of Him, but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed. It would have been better for that man if he had not been born.”*

In that sentence Jesus affirms both God’s divine sovereignty and Human responsibility. Jesus can say, *“the Son of Man goes as it was written of him,”* and *“woe to that man by whom he is betrayed.”* God’s divine plan that Judas be the one to betray Jesus does not at all negate Judas’ moral responsibility to not betray Jesus. Judas is still responsible to be faithful to his Lord and to not fall away. And when he is not, he is damned.

Thus any talk which tries to pit predestination over against human responsibility is only looking at one side of the truth.

By betraying Jesus, Judas helps to bring God’s plan to fruition. His evil act is like that of Joseph’s brothers who sold him into slavery, but what they meant for evil, God meant for good. It was written of the Son of Man that he would be betrayed by Judas. But woe to that man by whom the Son of Man was betrayed.

As Calvinists we believe in both the preservation of the Saints and the perseverance of the Saints. God promises to preserve His saints and to keep them from falling away. This of course is the logical conclusion to Predestination and election. Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus (Rom. 8:35-39). Jesus says, *“no one will snatch us out His Father’s Hand”* (John 10:28-29). God preserves us by His grace.

However, the perseverance of the saints is the other side of the same coin. For God preserves us in Him through our persevering. In the same Gospel of John, where Jesus says “no one will ever snatch us out of the Father’s hand,” he also warns that there are branches that can choose to not remain in Him, the true vine, and as a result will be thrown into the fire and burned. And here we see both truths of God’s sovereignty and human responsibility working together in a mystery.

John 15:1-6 "I am the true vine, and My Father is the vineyard keeper. Every branch in Me that does not produce fruit **He removes**, and He prunes every branch that produces fruit so that it will produce more fruit...**Remain in Me**, (who is to do the remaining? Clearly the branches) and I in you. Just as a branch is unable to produce fruit by itself unless it remains on the vine, so neither can you unless you remain in Me. I am the vine; you are the branches. The one who remains in Me and I in him produces much fruit, because you can do nothing without Me. If anyone does not remain in Me, he is thrown aside like a branch and he withers. They gather them, throw them into the fire, and they are burned."

And so, we see that God removes that branch which chose to not remain in the vine and bear fruit. Now you might say, Ah, but the reason the branches didn’t remain in the vine and bear fruit is because God chose to remove them.

But consider if you will a similar analogy as used in Romans 11:

Romans 11:19-21 – Then you will say, "Branches were cut off so that I could be grafted in." That's right! They were broken off because of their unbelief, but you remain only because of faith. Do not be arrogant, but be afraid! For if God did not spare the natural branches, he certainly will not spare you either. Consider, then, the kindness and severity of God: his

severity toward those who fell, but God's kindness toward you—if you continue in his kindness. Otherwise, you too will be cut off.

The Scriptures do not present the reality of apostasy as being the fault of God. All sin and unbelief and apostasy and falls right at the feet of the person who is guilty. And God's covenantal response to unbelief is to cut off such a person who has refused to remain through faith.

You see, People of God, We are called to work out our own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to work to do His will (Phil. 2:12-13). Jesus teaches that only those who persevere and endure to the end will be saved (Matt. 24:13). However, this perseverance is assured for God's elect, because God is at work in them to will them to work and persevere. But we do not know who is elect, and so we should never be so proud as to say, like Peter, “*Though they all fall away, I never will.*” You don't know that. You could willingly choose to fall away from Christ.

This is why Peter himself came to the understanding that you must make your calling and election sure.

*⁵For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, ⁶and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, ⁷and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. ⁸For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹For whoever lacks these qualities is so nearsighted that he is blind, having forgotten that he was cleansed from his former sins. ¹⁰Therefore, brothers, be all the more diligent to confirm your calling and election, for if you practice these qualities you will never fall. ¹¹For in this way **(by being diligent to confirm your calling and election by practicing and increasing in***

the virtues) *there will be richly provided for you an entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.*

If apostasy was not a real threat, then why does Paul himself warn Timothy of it?

1 Timothy 1:18-20 – By rejecting conscience, certain persons have made shipwreck of their faith, among them Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have delivered to Satan that they may learn not to blaspheme.

*1 Timothy 4:1-5 – Now the Spirit clearly says that in the last times some of the faith **will apostatize** by being devoted to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons, by the hypocrisy of liars whose **own consciences have been seared,***

People of God, the Scriptures teach us that if we are not careful to guard our consciences and to do all that we can to remain and abide in Christ, increasing in the virtues, then we can fall away from Christ and be removed from the vine. Many of those who have tasted of the heavenly gift have fallen away, Hebrews says. Paul says of those Christians who go back to being justified by keeping the law of Moses and looking to circumcision, they have been cut off from Christ. Even the most loyal disciple of Christ, Peter himself, is not immune to falling away, at least for a moment.

While we should be aware that the powers that be are seeking to destroy us, and while we should be aware that there are Judas' who are willing to betray us, we should also beware, even more so, that we too are just as capable of falling away from Christ in our day, just as the Apostle's did in theirs, and do everything in our power to make sure that does not happen.

The Apostles fell away in dark days. It was the sixth evening. The darkness was great, only to get a bit darker once more when Jesus would be in the

tomb. And we too are entering into dark days. But I believe that if Christians are to withstand the temptation to fall away, they must be gathering together with a Body of believers and be partaking of the Lord's Supper frequently.

THE LORD'S SUPPER – MEDICINE FOR UNBELIEF

Thus we see, right in the middle of these sections about falling away, we have the Lord's Supper given to his disciples. And notice, he doesn't just give it to those who will not fall away. He gives communion to all of them, even Judas. The Lord's Supper is the medicine for the soul for Christian disciples who are tempted to betray Jesus either through willful unbelief, like Judas, or unwilful and ignorant acts of unbelief, like Peter and the rest. It is for those who say one moment, "*Even if I have to die, I will never betray you*", and then the next moment says when confronted by a little girl, "*I do not know the man.*"

As the darkness of evil and unbelief increase around us, People of God, the Church should all the more gather together to partake of Christ's Body and Blood. For it is the Lord's Supper which binds us together making us one of another, and making us one with Christ, and which renews our hearts to Him and His covenant to and with us.

Christ says, This is my body: To eat this bread is to be in union with Christ's body, his body that was about to be offered up on the cross. Jesus is giving himself for his disciples and to his disciples, so that they might also carry their crosses and give up their lives for him and the gospel. Their eating of this bread speaks therefore to their participation with Christ in his upcoming death and their union with one another in Christ. *The bread we break is a participation in the body of Christ. Thus, because there is one loaf of bread, we who are many are one body for we all partake of the one loaf of bread.*

Thus, if you are to remain a member of the body of Christ, or a branch of the vine, you must partake of that one body of Christ. Apostasy happens when a Christian continually cuts himself off from the rest of the Body of Christ. The Eucharistic Bread is given to us to keep us together as members of Christ and of one another. A branch withers and dies when it is removed from the vine. A body is maimed and dismembered when one of its members is removed. If you want to have the life of Christ in you then you need to be coming to the Lord's Table with Christ's Body, and there you must eat His body with his body – the Church.

Consider also the significance of Christ's words when he says of the wine, **this is my blood of the covenant**, which is poured out for many: **The blood of the covenant – is a reference to Ex. 24** – As the Covenant given on Mt Sinai was ratified, Moses took the blood of the sacrifice and split it in two. The first part he splashed the blood upon the altar, symbolically pouring it out for God to drink, and the second part he splashed upon the people, after he read them the law and they promised to be obedient to all that the Lord had spoken. Then, Moses and Aaron and Nadab and Abihu and the 70 elders of Israel went up on the Mountain and they ate and drank in God's presence.

This covenant making ceremony was being reinterpreted by Jesus with His disciples.

Jesus uses this worship offering language when he says that this wine is his blood of the covenant that is “poured out” for many. His blood is the blood of the covenant by which he sets his people apart or sanctifies them to be the people of God.

But the blood is not merely sprinkled on us like it was to the Israel of old. Jesus has us drinking his blood in the Supper. It is not his literal blood,

but he does equate the wine with his blood as he does the bread with his body.

Not only is Jesus forgiving us of our sins in the wine, but he is also showing that we are the New Altars of God. The blood that was split in two and was poured out upon the altar and then the people, is now poured out inside of us when we drink it. And when he pours out the wine into each one of us, when we drink it, Jesus is teaching us that God himself has taken up residence within each one of us, and each believer becomes a living altar of God.

And so, we must take care to consider how important it is for our salvation that we do not neglect to meet together, as is now sadly, the habit of some, and thus remove ourselves from the Lord's Supper and from Christ. Now, I am of course not talking about those who are home for a week or two because of sickness and who are right back to worship as soon as they are able.

I am talking about the spiritual dangers that accompany such people in our day and age that have stopped going to worship altogether because of whatever reason, Covid, health concerns, threats to life and liberty and family. Whatever. If you remove yourself from Christ and the from His body and from His table for such an extended period of time, you are removing yourself from salvation.

The Westminster Confession of Faith 25.2 says, that there is no ordinary possibility of salvation outside the visible Church, which is the Body of Christ. And, likewise, the Westminster Shorter Catechism likewise declares that the sacraments are effectual means of salvation by the working of the Spirit in them that receive the sacrament by faith.

People of God, it is wholly consistent classical and reformed Christianity, that for a person to receive salvation from Christ they must ordinarily

receive Christ by faith in the receiving of the sacraments with the rest of Church of Christ, which is His body.

Now, I would like to conclude my sermon today by reading an excerpt from a book. It records the testimony of some early Christians during the persecution under the Roman Emperor Diocletian. They were forbidden to assemble because it was seen as being harmful to the commonwealth. It is interesting that these Christians did not abandon their observance of the Eucharist, and were willing to suffer and die in order to keep the feast. Not because they were selfish, but in fact, because they believed it was for the salvation of others that they refused to give up meeting together.

[READ FROM MASSEY H. SHEPHERD JR., THE WORSHIP OF THE CHURCH, SEABURY PRESS: NEW YORK, 1952. PGS 3-8.]

People of God, if we are to remain steadfast and faithful under trial and temptations, if we are going to remain in the vine and bear fruit, if we are going to be saved, then we must not concede to those who would seek to destroy Christianity root and branch by neglecting to come to Eucharist. Instead, we must come to him who forgives us of our small apostasies that we commit against him every day, and must renew covenant with him at His table where he makes us one with him and he with us. And here at this, our Lord's Table, Christ comforts us with salvation in His body and blood, and lets us know, that he loves us unto death. Amen.

Galatians 6:7-10 - Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life. And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up.

*Phil. 3:17ff*¹⁷ Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us. ¹⁸For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. ¹⁹Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things.

Colossians 1:21-23 – Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation—if you continue in your faith, established and firm, and do not move from the hope held out in the gospel.

Hebrews 3:7-19 – So, as the Holy Spirit says: "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion, during the time of testing in the desert, where your fathers tested and tried me and for forty years saw what I did. That is why I was angry with that generation, and I said, 'Their hearts are always going astray, and they have not known my ways.' So I declared on oath in my anger, 'They shall never enter my rest.'" See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away ["falls away," NASB] from the living God. But encourage ["exhort," ESV] one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness. We have come to share in Christ if we hold firmly till the end the confidence we had at first. As has just been said: "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion." Who were they who heard and rebelled? Were they

not all those Moses led out of Egypt? And with whom was he angry for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the desert? And to whom did God swear that they would never enter his rest if not to those who disobeyed? So we see that they were not able to enter, because of their unbelief.

Hebrews 6:4–8 – For it is impossible, in the case of those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, and then have fallen away, to restore them again to repentance, since they are crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm and holding him up to contempt. For land that has drunk the rain that often falls on it, and produces a crop useful to those for whose sake it is cultivated, receives a blessing from God. But if it bears thorns and thistles, it is worthless and near to being cursed, and its end is to be burned.

Hebrews 10:26–31 – For if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries. Anyone who has set aside the law of Moses dies without mercy on the evidence of two or three witnesses. How much worse punishment, do you think, will be deserved by the one who has spurned the Son of God, and has profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has outraged the Spirit of grace? For we know the One who has said, Vengeance belongs to Me, I will repay, and again, ***The Lord will judge His people***. It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God!

Hebrews 10:36–39 – For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God you may receive what is promised. For, "Yet a little while, and the coming one will come and will not delay; but my righteous one shall live by faith, and if he shrinks back, my soul has no pleasure in him." But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls.