

Matthew 26:31-56. How Loyal Are You?

*“Take up thy cross and follow me,”
I heard my Master say;
“I gave me life to ransom thee,
Surrender your all today.”*

*Wherever He leads I'll go,
Wherever He leads I'll go,
I'll follow my Christ who loves me so,
Wherever He leads I'll go.¹*

How many of us have sung those words at the close of a worship service? This is one of the more common “invitation” hymns that draw from the congregation a testimony of faithfulness and commitment to obedience to the LORD. However, as these words are sung, how many people truly and sincerely fulfill the words of this promise: “Wherever He leads I’ll go”? It is likely that most who sing these words are not paying close attention to what they are saying, and their willingness to follow the the LORD anywhere He leads is tempered by their lifestyle choices.

In a 40-year career in ministry there have been an inestimable number of times I have asked or invited church members who are faithful in attendance to step out of their “comfort zone” and take part in some form of ministry only to hear a plethora of reasons for refusal. It is easy to say, “Wherever He leads,” but it seems much more difficult to go when the pathway is not our own.

On the night that Jesus was taken prisoner by the Jerusalem religious leadership (through the conscription of Roman soldiers and temple guards), the disciples faced the first opportunity to step out of their comfort zone in order to follow Jesus. There may be times that, in order to be obedient to the call that we receive from the LORD, it may be necessary to step out of our comfort zone, into an area that could bring no little anxiety and fear. We are all accustomed to managing our lives under our own control, making our own decisions, and by so doing, maintaining a certain element of security by protecting ourselves against the unknown. However, when the LORD calls us to step out of that self-protection, our natural response is to rationalize away the primacy of the call and simply refuse to follow Him.

¹ B.B. McKinney, 1936.

After three years in close relationship with Jesus Christ, the disciples and Apostles all had the opportunity to find out if the commitment in the LORD that they professed was equal to the commitment that they would express when the true need to exercise that commitment was realized.

A TESTIMONY OF CONFIDENT COMMITMENT

Matthew 26:31-32. *Then saith Jesus unto them, All ye shall be offended because of me this night: for it is written, I will smite the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock shall be scattered abroad. ³²But after I am risen again, I will go before you into Galilee.*

In these last few hours prior to Jesus' arrest, the Apostles' true commitment to Him will be put to the test. They are about to find their comfort zone destroyed when events take place that will fill them with fear and confusion. As Jesus is relating what is about to take place, He quotes from the prophecy of Zechariah, a declaration that on this very night (1) God is going to "smite the Shepherd," and (2) all His followers will be scattered.² At that one time that Jesus needs the Apostles the most, they will choose to abandon Him. Jesus is quite aware that the Apostles will abandon Him on this very night, and though the Apostles and disciples do not yet understand what He is teaching, He does state that He will meet with them after He is risen.

Matthew 26:33. *Peter answered and said unto him, Though all men shall be offended because of thee, yet will I never be offended.*

When Jesus makes a statement that elicits a response from the Apostles, we often find Peter to be the first one to speak. However, we might note that, though Peter's impetuous and self-confident personality comes through at these times, he is still speaking for all of the Apostles who have similar thoughts. The word that is rendered "offended," may also mean to "fall away" or to "abandon." The idea is clear: Jesus is telling the Apostles that they will all abandon Him this very night, and Peter's response is predictable when he confidently states that he would never do so.

It is often easy for us to make such statements when we have not yet experienced the circumstances that would cause us to question our commitment. Peter had no context from which to form any scenario that he thought would cause him to turn away from Jesus. He had great confidence that he would stand with Jesus in any situation. However, the LORD knows the weaknesses of our heart and the true tenuousness of our commitments.

² Zechariah 13:7.

Matthew 26:34. *Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, That this night, before the cock crow, thou shalt deny me thrice.*

The LORD, who is eternal, not only knows the true nature of our heart, He also knows the details of our future since, from His vantage point in eternity, He already “sees” it. This should be a humbling concept when we come to understand that the LORD knows the sin we will commit tomorrow, but that does not impact His love for us. Like all of us, Peter is in need of some humbling. The write of the gospel of Luke records that Jesus had already told Peter that “Satan has desired to have you that he may sift you like wheat.”³ This same term was used to describe the work of the LORD when He worked to teach a lesson of humility to Israel.⁴ The LORD certainly allows circumstances to take place in our lives that will give us opportunity to respond either in obedience or disobedience. We would likely predict that we would respond in obedience, but will often find that obedience is not that easy.

Matthew 26:35. *Peter said unto him, Though I should die with thee, yet will I not deny thee. Likewise also said all the disciples.*

Again, Peter’s response is predictable. He has not yet been put to the test, and the one that he is about to receive is entirely outside of his world view. His statement of commitment is honest and sincere. Peter truly believes that he would choose to die with Jesus if such circumstances would take place. He fully believes that he would not abandon Jesus. We may not have noted that, though Peter is recorded as making this confident statement, all of the disciples are described as being in agreement with him as he speaks for them. We may not identify as well with Peter’s boasting confidence as we may with the other apostles who may not be as vocal about their commitment, but they are also quick to confidently testify to their commitment to the LORD.

THE TEST BEGINS

Matthew 26:36-38. *Then cometh Jesus with them unto a place called Gethsemane, and saith unto the disciples, Sit ye here, while I go and pray yonder. ³⁷And he took with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and began to be sorrowful and very heavy. ³⁸Then saith he unto them, My soul is exceeding sorrowful, even unto death: tarry ye here, and watch with me.*

³ Luke 22.1

⁴ Isaiah 30:28; Amos 9:9.

Prior to His arrest, Jesus went to the Garden of Gethsemane, near the Mount of Olives, with the eleven Apostles to pray. This event will be a demonstration of what it means to be obedient to God even when circumstances are extremely difficult, a lesson that the Apostles desperately need at this very late hour in Jesus' teaching ministry.

Taking the Apostles with him, he asked eight of the apostles to wait for Him at what appears to be the entrance to this small garden while He took Peter, James and John further with Him. We may note that it was common for Jesus to provide additional teaching and additional experiences for these three who would become "pillars" of the church following Jesus' ascension.

Having taken Peter, James and John with Him, Jesus revealed to them the reason for their coming to the garden. Knowing of the brutality and suffering that He was about to experience, Jesus shared with these three the feelings of His heart, a heart that was full of extreme sorrow and grief. It would seem that this statement alone would have been sufficient to arrest the attention of the Apostles. Jesus then gave them a simple command: to wait there as He went further into the garden, and to keep watch.

The word for "keep watch" is the same word that is used to describe the task of a Roman soldier who is commanded to "keep watch." Jesus is simply asking the Apostles to stay alert and keep watch with Him while He takes some time alone to pray.

A DEMONSTRATION OF LOYALTY

Matthew 26:39. *And he went a little further, and fell on his face, and prayed, saying, O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt.*

Some have wondered how, if Jesus was alone during the prayer, do we know the content of a portion of it. It is possible that the three Apostles were able to hear from where they were waiting. However, it is probably more likely that Jesus told them of the content of the prayer during the time He spent with them between His resurrection and ascension.

Some have questioned the theological import of Jesus' statement of will. There is no question that we are witnessing the humanity of Jesus, as He expresses the full range of emotion and grief that would precede the knowledge of the certainty of the extreme pain and suffering that He is about to experience. If there were any other way to accomplish the purpose of the Cross, it is only reasonable that the human experience would desire otherwise. If Jesus is God,

and the Father is God, how could their will differ? In truth, they do not. Jesus' will and that of the Father are identical: the price of salvation is to be paid at the Cross. If there were any other way, the humanity of Jesus would choose otherwise, but His nature is that of the Father.

Matthew 26:40-41. *And he cometh unto the disciples, and findeth them asleep, and saith unto Peter, What, could ye not watch with me one hour? ⁴¹Watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation: the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.*

After praying, Jesus returned to Peter, James, and John to find them sleeping at this late hour. It is evident that the three did not understand the import of this moment. The quiet of the evening and the seeming security of the garden, made that much more secure by the presence of the LORD gave them only reason to relax. Being tired, it was difficult to keep the "watch," particularly when they did not perceive any threat.

Jesus repeated the command to watch and pray, but now He added two important points: first, that they would pray that they would not fall to temptation. Jesus' wrestling with the will of the Father demonstrates the weakness of the flesh that has now demonstrated that He fully understands at a personal level. Though Jesus is not tempted to deny the Cross, He fully understands the power that temptation can have to draw one away from the will of the Father. As Jesus is working through this conflict of wills, He demonstrates that He has reason to recognize this same battle that the Apostles are about to enter.

With this conflict underway, Jesus is not finished...

Matthew 26:42. *He went away again the second time, and prayed, saying, O my Father, if this cup may not pass away from me, except I drink it, thy will be done.*

Lest we, or the Apostles think that this conflict is not real, we find that Jesus returned to prayer. The content of the synoptic gospels imply that each of these sessions of prayer were lengthy, possibly as long as an hour. Consequently, only the one sentence that reveals the subject matter of the prayer is recorded. This time, we do not find Jesus referring to the will of His humanity, but rather we find His resolute agreement with the will of the Father.

If one is to find unity with God, the only way it is to be found is to be obedient to Him. Whatever our will may be, it is His will that serves us better, and it is His will that is to be served. Jesus demonstrated this to us in the garden, as He also

did to the Apostles. It is a lesson that they would come to understand in a few days' time. It is likely that it is taking us a little longer.

Matthew 26:43-44. *And he came and found them asleep again: for their eyes were heavy. ⁴⁴And he left them, and went away again, and prayed the third time, saying the same words.*

There are many instances in the biblical narrative where completeness is illustrated by the repetition of something twice. Three represents completeness, and a return to prayer for a third time demonstrates that Jesus' prayer is full and complete. It is after this third session of prayer that Jesus is now prepared to continue in the will of the Father, fully knowing that this next step He is taking alone.

Matthew 26:45. *Then cometh he to his disciples, and saith unto them, Sleep on now, and take your rest: behold, the hour is at hand, and the Son of man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. ⁴⁶Rise, let us be going: behold, he is at hand that doth betray me.*

When Jesus returned to the disciples, now including all eleven, He again found them sleeping. It is quite likely that there is a period of time between verse 45 and verse 46. Finding them asleep, and knowing what is going to take place this very night, Jesus, rather than point out their lack of watchfulness and lack of perception of the gravity of this moment, simply spoke softly to them, calling upon them to rest until the moment would come when Judas would approach them. They would need this rest, because once Judas arrives, there will be none for the remainder of the night. The disciples would not rest until He has died on the Cross.

Immediately before the arrival of Judas, Jesus awakened the disciples.

Matthew 26:47. *And while he yet spake, lo, Judas, one of the twelve, came, and with him a great multitude with swords and staves, from the chief priests and elders of the people.*

Judas came with a small army. The only people in Jerusalem who were allowed the use of swords as an offensive weapon would be the Roman soldiers. The staves, or clubs, would be the weapon of choice for the Temple guards. They came at the bidding of the Jewish "chief priests and elders."

Matthew 26:48-50a. *Now he that betrayed him gave them a sign, saying, Whomsoever I shall kiss, that same is he: hold him fast. ⁴⁹And*

***forthwith he came to Jesus, and said, Hail, master; and kissed him.
50 And Jesus said unto him, Friend, wherefore art thou come?***

There has been much speculation concerning the primary motive of Judas at this time. Judas believed that Jesus was the Messiah, and had seen His power demonstrated in many different ways. Fully thinking that Jesus came to Jerusalem to bring a new and independent Israel, his act would, to him, seem harmless, and would only serve to move the process along. Judas' later response to the consequences of his actions demonstrate his complete misunderstanding of the context of his actions at this time.

We may note that, even as Judas used the customary greeting of a kiss to reveal the identity to the soldiers and guards, Jesus still referred to him as "friend." This serves to illustrate the depth of God's love for us that, even as Judas was in the process of executing an act of betrayal that would be known from the first time it was recorded in prophecy until the end of the age, Jesus' love for him was not compromised. What Jesus did do was to remind Judas of this love, as He asked him a simple, rhetorical question: "You would come to me this way?" In modern vernacular, we might say, "Seriously, Jude? You would do this with a kiss?" The question was not intended for Jesus to learn of some unknown information, but rather was intended for Judas since these would be the last words that Judas would hear from Jesus. These words would be repeated over and over in Judas' mind as he would witness the overwhelming consequence of his choice to sin.

Matthew 26:50b-51. Then came they, and laid hands on Jesus, and took him. 51 And, behold, one of them which were with Jesus stretched out his hand, and drew his sword, and struck a servant of the high priest's, and smote off his ear.

The writer of the Gospel of John notes that it is the Apostle Peter who took his own sword and drew his sword.⁵ We might note that Peter is not demonstrating any particular prowess with the use of a sword as an offensive weapon. The disciples had two swords between them, obtained immediately after the meal.⁶ It is likely that in the darkness of the garden, the close proximity of all of the men that were there, and the chaos of the moment, led Peter to clumsily draw his sword only to strike the side of the head of an individual close to him: one of the servants of the high priest. The one struck was neither a soldier nor a temple guard. Peter's impetuosity led to the injury of the servant. Though Matthew does not record Jesus' response to the need of the servant, but the writer of Luke

⁵ John 18:10.

⁶ Luke 22:38.

records Jesus' calming the Apostles who were ready to defend Jesus with their swords, and He then touched the servant, immediately healing his wound.⁷

Matthew 26:52-54. *Then said Jesus unto him, Put up again thy sword into his place: for all they that take the sword shall perish with the sword. ⁵³Thinkest thou that I cannot now pray to my Father, and he shall presently give me more than twelve legions of angels? ⁵⁴But how then shall the scriptures be fulfilled, that thus it must be?*

Peter had just drawn a sword with the full intention of standing up against a group of armed Roman guards. Luke denotes that the other Apostles were quite ready to use the other sword. It is evident that they knew that they had no chance of defeating the Roman soldiers in armed combat, but they were quite ready and willing to try – to die for Jesus Christ. We can be confident that this willingness to die for Jesus' defense was real, and they were ready to do so if necessary.

Jesus put an immediate stop to this behavior, explaining to them that there was no need for them to respond in this manner, that to take up the sword in battle is to be subject to death, and in this case, an unnecessary one.

Jesus is not without His own defense. The word, legion, is a military term that refers to a battalion of at least six thousand soldiers. The Roman army was well-organized, and that organization is well-documented and well known. Consequently, the number is selected to impress the Apostles to understand the tremendous power that Jesus has at his disposal to defend Himself: an army of 72,000 angels. The Apostles, and all His disciples to follow must understand that the events of this night and those of the next few days will be done by Jesus' own choice.

Matthew 26:55-56a, *In that same hour said Jesus to the multitudes, Are ye come out as against a thief with swords and staves for to take me? I sat daily with you teaching in the temple, and ye laid no hold on me. ⁵⁶But all this was done, that the scriptures of the prophets might be fulfilled.*

It is likely that the Roman guards did not know of any teaching that Jesus did in the Temple, though perhaps some of the Temple guards did. Judas' task of pointing out the identity of Jesus when the crowd approached the garden at night would infer that at least the Romans would not recognize Him. However, there were some in the crowd who did listen to Jesus' teaching in the Temple, and it is

⁷ Luke 22:50-51.

to them that He now says a few words that are intended for them to hear. These are the same people who heard his teaching, yet were caught up in the event. It is important that these people understand, like Judas, the import of their actions. Those who had listened to Him with an intent to follow Him were now joined with those who would have Him violently arrested. They sat with Him in the Temple but were now coming against Him.

Jesus pointed out that what they are witnessing is the fulfillment of the prophecies concerning the suffering and death of the Messiah as recorded in the Hebrew Bible. Though Jesus does not quote any particular prophecy, He is turning attention to the many passages that describe what will be taking place in the next several days so that they might recognize them at the appropriate time.

A DEMONSTRATION OF DISLOYALTY

Matthew 26:56b. *Then all the disciples forsook him, and fled.*

In probably one of the most significant statements in this passage, we find that all the disciples fled at this point. Now that the passion of the conflict had passed, their emotional willingness to die for Jesus was now demonstrated in the truth of their commitment: they left as a group, leaving Jesus with the mob that came to arrest Him, realizing that they could be the next ones taken.

All of their grand words of commitment were suddenly nullified. When the first opportunity came to stand on the promises that they had made, they turned tail and ran away.

We should not be too critical or judgmental of the Apostles for their behavior at this time, for it is likely that most of us would have done the same. True obedience to the will of the LORD will always move us to take action, either by being disobedient and running away, or by being obedient and stepping out in faith.

The only true source of power that can enable us to turn from our own fears and follow the LORD in obedience is that which we receive from the Holy Spirit. The scriptures record that the Apostles (and disciples) did not “receive” the Holy Spirit until immediately following Jesus’ resurrection when He gave it to them in the upper room.⁸ Faithful disciples of Jesus Christ have no such excuse. The Holy Spirit is clearly speaking to all faithful believers when they face the conflict that arises when our will is different than His will. It is our will to remain safe behind our pews on Sunday morning when the Holy Spirit may be calling us to step out and follow Him in a specific task or purpose. When invited to join Him in ministry,

⁸ John 20:22.

perhaps at the invitation of another Christian, like the Apostles in the garden, we turn tail and run.

When we think of loyalty, consider how loyal Jesus was to you on that night that He was betrayed. He could have called down twelve legions of angels and wiped every one of His “enemies” off the face of the earth. However, it was His loyalty to the Father and His loyalty to you that led Him to the Cross.

How do we respond to such loyalty and love shown to us from God, Himself? Do we show our loyalty by giving Him an hour on a Sunday morning while we give Him tacit attention that we demand ends at twelve noon? If you are watching the clock towards the end of the service you are demonstrating an amazing disloyalty to the LORD who died for you. You would rather be somewhere else than in the House of the LORD. When asked to serve the LORD whether within the church or without by exercising the amazing gifts that He has given to you for His purposes rather than your own do you simply say, “No” to Him?

When we look at the love that the LORD has for us, and the amazing gift of grace that He has given us when He forgave us for our sinfulness by His own blood, how can we be so disloyal? If Jesus is truly our LORD, He is truly the authority in our lives.

We would consider it an honor to personally serve a person in high estate in this world, such as a president of a country. Why would we approach the service to the God of all creation with less willingness?

How truly loyal are you to the LORD? Then next time you hear or sing those words, “Wherever He leads I’ll go,” pause and ask yourself if these words are fully true. The answer might surprise you.