



Matthew 26:57-75.

Your Loyalty to Christ

How loyal are you? What determines your loyalty to the things around you? There are many activities in life that draw upon our loyalty that we may not actually realize. Many who are interested in spectator sports can become intensely loyal to their favorite team or teams. They purchase their logoed products, participate in watching their games, often responding quite emotionally to the action that takes place on the field of play. Yet, for all their effort and loyalty, they usually have little or no investment in the team, and the outcome of their games makes no difference in their lives once the postgame show is over.

We are often loyal to particular stores and restaurants. We may have many choices in our community but will usually frequent a very small percentage of the businesses, preferring to stay with a small subset of those in the community. For example, there are probably over 100 restaurants within a thirty-minute drive from our home, and my wife and I probably “eat out” at least three to five times each week.¹ However, it is likely that we choose between less than ten of these and have rarely walked through the doors of the others.

The loyalty that fans (which, by the way, is an abbreviation for “fanatic”) have for their favorite sports teams is legendary. Many sports fans will cheer louder and get far more excited for their “team” than they ever do for the LORD. They wear the team logo with pride and will take the time to learn everything about the team: its play roster and its inexhaustible array of statistics. Yet, all of this loyalty is demonstrated towards an entity with which they have no real relationship or influence.

We are also, most likely, quite loyal to our chosen church fellowship. We often refer to the church that we regularly attend as “our” church, with many people taking that concept of ownership too far, often to the point of creating conflict in the fellowship when they make demands to satisfy their personal desires. We

¹ Fair warning: this tends to happen after your youngest child leaves home and it is easier to eat “out” rather than cook for just one or two people.

are so loyal to our church fellowship that we may feel that we are committing some form of transgression if we are to visit another.

However, what happens when an event takes place that causes the light in the object of our loyalty to shine less brightly? What do we do when our favorite team experiences a sequence of losses, either on or off the field.² Perhaps the restaurant that we faithfully attend has a change in management and staff, and the quality of the food and service drops dramatically. Perhaps our church fellowship is experiencing internal discord that is brought by an attempt by some of its membership to exercise their personal control over the body.

In most situations when we experience conflict with the object of our loyalty, we vote with our feet. We can easily switch our loyalty to another sports team when they have a losing season or to another athlete when our favorite falls into trouble. We can easily avoid returning to what was our favorite restaurant and find another when the service or quality of their product is not to our liking. Many workers switch jobs when they are no longer pleased with their employment or, more commonly, they lose confidence in the management. Unfortunately, this is also true in our churches, for when the going gets tough, many of the members get going... somewhere else.

Whether we weather the storm and press through when difficult events would serve to separate us from the objects of our loyalties is a function of our commitment, and for most things in life, our commitments may not be as strong as we would glibly admit. Perhaps one of the more devastating examples of voting with our feet takes place in a marriage where the couple lack the commitment to work through the tough times together and strengthen their bond, choosing instead to destroy the network of relationships that the marriage represents. The typical result of this disloyalty to one another has consequences that remain for the rest of their lives.

While Jesus was ministering in and around Galilee there were certainly similar systems of loyalty in play. The Apostles demonstrated a very high degree of loyalty as they stayed close to Jesus during the three years prior to His' crucifixion. Many other disciples also demonstrated similar loyalty to Jesus and to His message. Meanwhile, in Jerusalem, the center of Jewish political and religious influence, a network of leadership also demonstrated loyalties to one another, to the Temple, and in their own way of thinking, to their understanding of God. When Jesus came into Jerusalem with a cheering crowd, the systems of

² With four consecutive Superbowl losses from 1990 – 1993 in their only appearances at the event to date, fans started joking that the Buffalo "BILLS" stood for, "Boy, I Love Losing Superbowls!"

loyalty experienced by both those who followed Jesus and those who claimed religious authority would be significantly challenged. We may observe devastating failure on the parts of both communities when the “going gets tough.”

Matthew 26:57. *And they that had laid hold on Jesus led him away to Caiaphas the high priest, where the scribes and the elders were assembled.*

Since this passage begins with a conjunctive adverb, usually translated, “and,” we might note what just took place prior to this text. Jesus and the Apostles were gathered for prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane. As Jesus prayed what was probably the most significant and emotional prayer of His ministry experience, the Apostles slept, wholly unaware of the import of the event. Where Jesus was preparing for the events to follow, the Apostles were completely unprepared when Judas arrived with a small army of Roman soldiers, Temple guards, and others. Together, with a small crowd of Jerusalem elite, they took Jesus prisoner following a short-lived and ill-attempted act of resistance by the Apostles. Upon the seizure of Jesus, the Apostles all fled, except for Peter and John (and possibly James) who followed Jesus and His captors at a safe distance.

The narrative states that they “laid hold” of Jesus. There were several other attempts to seize Jesus, but in those instances, Jesus simply walked into the crowds and could not be found.³ It is likely that, though Jesus was going with them of His own will, the guards placed Him in some form of shackles.

We find that nine of the Apostles fled, and two stayed in the close background. It is not surprising that the two who followed Jesus were two of the three Apostles who Jesus provided with additional attention and training. We can observe in this a scale of commitment to the LORD where, considering the danger of following Jesus, Peter and John demonstrated a greater loyalty to the LORD as they did what they thought they could do under the circumstances.

The squad of soldiers was sent by Caiaphas, the Jewish high priest with the command to bring Jesus to him. Caiaphas had gathered around himself the “scribes and the elders.” This would include the Sanhedrin, the ruling council in Jerusalem, a zealous group that was characterized by “insincerity, self-protective cunning, honest religious devotion, conscientious soul searching and fanaticism.”⁴ It was late at night, and it was probably not unusual for this group

³ John 6:15, 7:30, 8:59, 10:39.

⁴ Brown, Raymond. *The Death of the Messiah*, vol 1. New York, NY: Doubleday 1994. p 434.

to gather together to discuss important matters of Jewish polity. However, this night was different. As experts of the Law of Moses, a set of rules that they dedicated themselves to protect and defend, they would dispense with every nuance of its rules in order to attain their goal: to rid themselves of this itinerant preacher who has continually insulted their system of belief and challenged their authority in front of all the people. Their conflict with Jesus is not about faith in God and is not about any charge that they can make with Him under Roman law. They simply hated Jesus and wanted this one, who's "heresies" would threaten their authority and power, dead.

We may observe in the behavior of the Jewish leadership that their loyalty to God and their loyalty to the Law of Moses and the rules regarding the meeting of the Sanhedrin were just as compromised as that of the Apostles who fled. Caiaphas operated in an extremely difficult position, balancing Jewish religious interests with Roman political demands, which likely influenced his decision to support the religious zealot's demand for Jesus' execution rather than risk potential Roman intervention against Jewish religious institutions or possible uprising.

Matthew 26:58. *But Peter followed him afar off unto the high priest's palace, and went in, and sat with the servants, to see the end.*

Though Matthew does not mention the presence of John, both Peter and John followed the crowd and entered a courtyard that was immediately attached to the house of Caiaphas. Though they came together, John entered first after talking with a young servant girl at the gate of entry. The girl recognized John as a disciple of Christ, though her recognition had no consequence.⁵ At this point, Peter remained behind, perhaps fearing to enter Caiaphas' property.

DENIED BY HIS ENEMIES

Matthew 26:59. *Now the chief priests, and elders, and all the council, sought false witness against Jesus, to put him to death;*

The base motive of the religious leadership is described immediately and leaves no room for doubt. Nothing that would take place this night would be done within the legal system that defined the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem. "The gathering of this group violated several basic rules:

⁵ John 18:15-17.

1. Meetings of the Sanhedrin could not be held at night – this meeting was clearly conducted under the cover of darkness;
2. The Sanhedrin did not gather during festivals – this trial was most certainly during one of the most sacred seasons of the year for the Jewish faithful;
3. The Sanhedrin was required to meet during successive days – this meeting was short and to the point;
4. Witnesses who came before the Sanhedrin were examined privately – the witnesses in this situation were sought without screening and spoke their witness publicly.⁶

The narrative clearly states that “all” of the counsel wanted Jesus to be put to death without any necessity of a fair trial, judgment, or hearing. “Caiaphas made only one decision: to arrest and execute Jesus.”⁷ Their task is to establish grounds for the execution of this “prisoner” without any true probable cause or His breaking any law either Mosaic or Roman. However, so that some semblance of a trial would be defensible, they sought out of their own number, a group that was united in their hatred of Jesus, the required two witnesses who could testify that Jesus has broken a law. At least at this point they are hoping that they can find Jesus guilty of breaking a Roman law.

Matthew 26:60-61. *But found none: yea, though many false witnesses came, yet found they none. At the last came two false witnesses, ⁶¹And said, This fellow said, I am able to destroy the temple of God, and to build it in three days.*

In pursuing a charge against Jesus, Caiaphas was surrounded by a crowd that all desired Jesus’ conviction on some form of charge, yet among all of them, not a single person could testify to any law that Jesus had broken. Even when they were pressed to contrive a lie, and many were pressed to do so, none could bring a charge against Jesus. There was simply no means to bring a legal charge against Jesus for the breaking of any law under the statutes of Rome.

The conflict that Jesus faced never had anything to do with Rome. His conflict was solely limited to the arrogance of the Jerusalem Jews who hated Him and His message that they perceived as a threat to their power over the people. During His ministry, Jesus claimed to be able to forgive sins that they believed

⁶ Wright, G. Al, Jr., Jewish Law and the Trials of Jesus. *Biblical Illustrator*. 23(2), Winter 1997. p 7.

⁷ Sanders, E.P. *The Historical Figure of Jesus*. London, UK: The Penguin Press, 1993. p 273.

only God can forgive.⁸ He also accepted the praise of the people that was intended for the Messiah when He entered Jerusalem only a few days before this event. This was another “heresy” they hated Him for and additionally served to fuel their festering anger. Consequently, when a member of the crowd stated, “This fellow said, I am able to destroy the Temple of God and to build it in three days,” the focus shifted to the real purpose of this illegal, mock trial. However, this too was a false testimony, as Jesus did not say that He would destroy the temple. His statement was literally “If **you** destroy this temple.”⁹ So even this last charge was simply a convenient lie.

Matthew 26:62-63. *And the high priest arose, and said unto him, Answerest thou nothing? what is it which these witness against thee? ⁶³But Jesus held his peace. And the high priest answered and said unto him, I adjure thee by the living God, that thou tell us whether thou be the Christ, the Son of God.*

When the high priest, who is considered by everyone in the room to be the one with the highest authority, questioned Jesus concerning the charges being brought against Him, Jesus was silent. This was not a legitimate court, and the high priest was not acting within the definition of his position. He had no authority, under the Law, or under God, to question Jesus. Also, he provided no required representative, a “lawyer,” for the accused. For Jesus to respond to his question would be to give some form of affirmation of the high priest’s authority, so the context of the situation demanded Jesus’ silence, and by so doing, fulfilled Old Testament prophecies.¹⁰

Frustrated with Jesus’ silence, which in and of itself was to Caiaphas a personal insult to his authority, something he was not accustomed to dealing with, the high priest broke another, very significant law, when He said, “I adjure you by the living God.” By doing this, he was appropriating for himself the authority of God when his own authority would not suffice. Such an oath was strictly forbidden under Mosaic Law.¹¹ Note that the question put forth by the high priest had nothing to do with the testimony of the witness. Disregarding all due

⁸ Luke 5:20.

⁹ The statement "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up" (John 2:19) refers to Jesus's own body, specifically his Resurrection after three days in the tomb. It is a statement of faith, not a prediction of a literal temple being destroyed and rebuilt in three days. Note however, that Jesus, as the true Tabernacle of God (God with us), through His resurrection, did indeed restore the Tabernacle forever, refuting an argument by some that Jesus “cannot” return until the physical Temple is restored on the Dome of the Rock, currently the site of the holiest of Islamic mosques.

¹⁰ Psalm 35:11; Isaiah 53:7-8.

¹¹ Exodus 20:7.

process, and ignoring the charges that were being brought, the high priest simply went to the heart of the matter and asked Jesus if He is claiming to be the promised Messiah.

The high priest had all the resources to recognize the Messiah. Jesus fulfilled all the prophecies concerning Himself that were relevant from the time of His birth to His presence in this mock court. Even their court and their behavior were described in the Hebrew Bible that they thought they knew so well. However, the religious leadership were so blinded by their religious bigotry that they could not recognize Jesus for who He really is. There was no point in Jesus simply stating, "I am the Messiah," since that was the very confession they were hoping to use to accuse Him of blasphemy. Consequently, Jesus made no such confession, requiring them to convict Him another way.

Matthew 26:64. *Jesus saith unto him, Thou hast said: nevertheless I say unto you, Hereafter shall ye see the Son of man sitting on the right hand of power, and coming in the clouds of heaven.*

Jesus did not say that He is the Messiah. He literally said, "It is you who are making this claim." This was not a sufficient answer for the high priest to bring any charge against Jesus. Instead of making the claim directly, Jesus spoke to their understanding of the Hebrew prophecies. Jesus often referred to Himself as the "Son of Man," which we might first assume refers to His humanity, rather than "Son of God" that would refer to His deity. However, the name, "Son of Man," refers to both the humanity and deity of the Messiah. Jesus draws upon this name as he quotes from Daniel 7:13. When Jesus quoted this prophecy, the high priest, the scribes, and the Pharisees would all immediately understand Jesus' reference to the Messiah. Literally, Jesus only claim in this mock court was the use He made of the name, "Son of Man" in His ministry. This sentence pointed to the prophecy, but made no literal claim that He was *that* Son of Man. He left that inference to the high priest and the other religious leaders. He simply said, "You will see the Messiah." However, it was an open secret that He was referring to Himself.

Matthew 26:65-66. *Then the high priest rent his clothes, saying, He hath spoken blasphemy; what further need have we of witnesses? behold, now ye have heard his blasphemy. ⁶⁶What think ye? They answered and said, He is guilty of death.*

The high priest did not need any clear declaration from Jesus. All he needed was to be able to rationalize His accusation against Jesus. By “rending his clothes” (which by this time became a ceremonial tear of a small area at the top of his robe) he added his mock grief to his accusation of blasphemy. However, even Caiaphas’ charge of blasphemy was loosely applied, since as defined by the Old Testament law, blasphemy involved cursing the Name of the LORD.¹² The crowd already wanted to kill Jesus, so they were simply waiting for their moment to respond to the high priest.¹³

Matthew 26:67-68. *Then did they spit in his face, and buffeted him; and others smote him with the palms of their hands, ⁶⁸Saying, Prophecy unto us, thou Christ, Who is he that smote thee?*

Then, in another egregious break with the Mosaic Law the religious leadership dispensed with all “court” proceedings and took out the anger and hatred that they had held for Jesus in a manner that would demean the authority and respect that was given to this itinerant preacher and demonstrate their own power over him. At this point Caiaphas allowed those near Jesus to vent their anger through physical abuse that included spitting on Him and striking Him. They also played a form of cruel game whereby they struck Him in a manner that He could not see the identity of the attacker and then demanded that He “prove” His prophetic powers by identifying the attackers.

DENIED BY HIS FRIENDS

Matthew 26:69-70. *Now Peter sat without in the palace: and a damsel came unto him, saying, Thou also wast with Jesus of Galilee. ⁷⁰But he denied before them all, saying, I know not what thou sayest.*

The gospel of John indicates that this “damsel,” is the same one that spoke to John when he entered the courtyard ahead of Peter and entered the courtyard without incident. Her identification of John posed no threat, and consequently, also posed no threat to Peter. However, Peter’s deep, paralyzing, and honest fear is quite evident, and is real. He has just witnessed, though from a distance, the

¹² Leviticus 24:15-16.

¹³ “The council’s reaction was predictable. Jesus was convicted of blasphemy. Though He did not utter ‘the Name,’ the counsel assigned the death penalty. As far as we can tell, the punishment was harsher than the law required, but was probably legal. Their problem then was to persuade Rome to agree that Jesus deserved to die. The counsel accomplished their purpose by changing the charge to treason, and bullying Pilate into an unjust crucifixion.” Martin, Michael, *Blasphemy: The Background*. *Biblical Illustrator*. 21(2), Winter 1995. p 45.

mock trial of Jesus, and the beating He is now receiving. In this instance, the servant girl spoke directly to him, and his response was given to those around him as well as her. He could have responded as John had previously done, saying, “yes, I am” to her, and all would have ended. There was nobody around him who was concerned about the presence of either Peter or John. However, his public response that denied any association with Jesus initiated a chain of events that he would never forget.

We might also note that the challenge came from a young girl, not from a man. This girl would have no authority to impose any threat to Peter, further illustrating the irrationality of Peter’s response. In this first response, Peter feigned understanding.

Matthew 26:71-72. *And when he was gone out into the porch, another maid saw him, and said unto them that were there, This fellow was also with Jesus of Nazareth. ⁷²And again he denied with an oath, I do not know the man.*

Where the first girl spoke only to Peter, in this second encounter, another young lady, likely another servant girl, recognized him and spoke to the people around her. Again, fearing the people, Peter denied any personal knowledge of Jesus, doing it with an oath. Again, as with the oath used by the high priest, the appropriation of a greater power for one’s own in this form was forbidden by Mosaic Law. We may also consider that women were not granted the public respect in the ancient near-east that they receive today, and this woman’s inquiry posed no real threat to Peter. Yet, in this second response, Peter stated a clear lie in order to protect himself.

Matthew 26:73. *And after a while came unto him they that stood by, and said to Peter, Surely thou also art one of them; for thy speech betrayeth thee. ⁷⁴Then began he to curse and to swear, saying, I know not the man. And immediately the cock crew.*

The third time Peter is encountered, he was approached by those around him who recognized his accent as one from the area of Galilee. However, this was the Passover week. The city was filled with Galileans. Peter’s response is indicative of his fear. It is likely that this fisherman knew how to curse and swear, but for the last three years this has not been a part of his vocabulary. Not only did Peter turn from Jesus, but he also turned back to those years before

he committed himself to follow Jesus and acted like a brazen fisherman. Again, his response was a lie as he stated that he did not know Jesus.¹⁴

Matthew 26:75. *And Peter remembered the word of Jesus, which said unto him, Before the cock crow, thou shalt deny me thrice. And he went out, and wept bitterly.*

The writer of the Gospel of Luke notes that Jesus looked at Peter at this point.¹⁵ One can only speculate what was going through Peter's mind as he now fully recognized his utter failure, and particularly that his failure was witnessed (and affirmed) by Jesus. That one glance from the Savior would have communicated volumes of narrative to this broken disciple. Realizing that failure, Peter wept. It is likely that from this point until the moment that Jesus restored him after the resurrection, Peter was in a very dark place.

When we observe the behavior of Peter up to this point in his life, he was best characterized as one who is bold, confident, intelligent, and impetuous. It was often Peter who would speak first when opportunities arose. These are all very good qualities when they are exercised in wisdom. However, Peter did not demonstrate that wisdom very frequently. Peter had allowed these characteristics to build in him a personal pride that would stand in the way of the purpose that the LORD had for him. Consequently, Peter was in need of a lesson, one that he would understand, and the best way to learn for someone who is proud and impetuous is from personal experience. Having made boastful promises of how he would never deny Jesus, and would even die for him, this experience dramatically demonstrated his utter failure to do so.

There is another lesson here for us, also. The Apostles had spent three years learning from Jesus, and while in His presence, they were in the presence of the Holy Spirit also. However, since they were not yet "filled" with the Holy Spirit, they did not have the resource of His power when they were away from Him. Peter did not have the benefit of the Holy Spirit's comfort, wisdom, and leadership yet at this point in his life, and was depending only upon that which he could do on his own. This experience demonstrated to Peter, as it does to us, how we are severely limited in our ability to accomplish God's work on our own power. Bereft of the Holy Spirit, we cannot accomplish anything greater than ourselves.

¹⁴ We might note that this is the most common "lie" that characterizes the lives of many Christians who openly profess their faith within the safe confines of the church sanctuary but deny that faith when they are outside the walls of the church either directly, or by their silence.

¹⁵ Luke 22:61.

However, Peter changed that night. His sense of self-confidence was shattered. Following the resurrection of Jesus and His training of the Apostles continued, we hear very little from Peter. Peter remained relatively quiet. Though the writer of the gospel of Matthew does not mention the event, the writer of the gospel of Luke records the post-resurrection event of Jesus when He called to the Apostles, who had returned to their fishing livelihood, to lower their nets in the shallows near the shore and pulled in an overwhelming catch. When the Apostles came to shore, Jesus took Peter aside and simply asked, “Do you love me (more than these)?”¹⁶ Just as Peter had denied Jesus three times, Jesus asked the question three times, though the literal questions varied.

During that encounter, Jesus showed His forgiveness of Peter’s behavior, and restored Peter’s spirit and confidence. However, we never again witness Peter making boastful statements as he now recognized his personal limitations and his utter dependence upon the LORD to accomplish any of the work that he has been called to do. As a result, Peter would become a dynamic voice for the LORD and positioned himself as the leader of the Apostles as the first-century church would be formed. He would personally lead more people to faith in the LORD in his first “sermon” on the day of Pentecost than came to the LORD during Jesus’ three years of ministry.

As Jesus had prophesied, Peter would remain faithful to Him, and would follow Him in a martyr’s death, doing so with courage and confidence in God.¹⁷

DENIED BY MODERN DISCIPLES

How faithful are we when called upon to take a stand for our faith? Perhaps there may be a little bit of Peter in all of us. We may confidently state that we are not ashamed of the gospel¹⁸ and would never deny the LORD but when our faith is put to the test, we find it far more difficult to follow through on that commitment. If this is the case, we can learn from the experience of Peter and recognize that, without depending upon the power of the Holy Spirit to enable us during those times, we will also be likely to find ourselves in a state of failure.

The relevance of the Christian church has been diminished in our world culture due to the silence of its members. There is a disconnect between the LORD’s command to bear witness and the act of doing so.¹⁹ We tend to think that the

¹⁶ John 21:15-18.

¹⁷ John 21:18-19.

¹⁸ Romans 1:16.

¹⁹ Acts 1:8.

task of sharing the gospel is given to someone else, often our pastors and missionaries, and somehow all others are freed of the responsibility. If one has sincere and true faith in the LORD, the Holy Spirit has already revealed the “prime directive” that is given to all faithful Christians to share the love of God with others, to make disciples. This is the basis of Jesus statement,

Matthew 10:33. *But whosoever shall deny me before men, him will I also deny before my Father which is in heaven.*

Jesus is not going to “deny” any faithful believer who has sincerely turned to Him in faith and trust. If we consider ourselves faithful believers, we need not find anxiety in Jesus statement as recorded in Matthew 10:33, since Jesus also said,

Matthew 5:14-16. *Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on an hill cannot be hid. ¹⁵Neither do men light a candle, and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick; and it giveth light unto all that are in the house. ¹⁶Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven.*

We often miss one small phrase in this passage: “A city on a hill cannot be hidden.” If you are a faithful believer, it is already evident to those around you. The question posed by the lost will not be “is this person a Christian,” but “why does this person not act like one?” Since the light of the Holy Spirit is already evident in the life of the faithful believer, there is no point in denying it, but rather “Let your light shine.” Note in this passage the purpose for this light: not so that you can be lifted up, but by letting your light shine people would be able to see the true motivation for your godly works and praise God for them.

As people of faith, let us let our light shine by sharing God’s love with others, taking every opportunity to communicate the veracity of our faith, listening to the Holy Spirit as it is He who gives us confidence in our faith and the guidance to minister to others in His name.