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The Gospel of Luke
LXXVI. Denied, Mocked, Rejected
Luke 22:54-71

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John Calvin famously wrote, *“It’s certain that man never achieves a clear knowledge of himself unless he has first looked upon God’s face, and then descends from contemplating [God] to scrutinize himself.”*¹ Certainly, that is what the Bible teaches. And certainly it is also just plain common sense to think that if we want to know who we are, what our lives are for, the first place to turn is to the One who created us, the One who gave us the breath of life, the One who – as Paul puts it – has *“determined the allotted periods and boundaries of our dwelling place.”*²

Which is why Jesus Christ is so important – or, at least, one of the reasons Jesus Christ is so important to us. Because in Jesus Christ we see not only what God is truly like, we see also what a human being is supposed to be like. In Him, who is both fully divine and perfectly human, we see what God has created us to be. If we want to know who we are, what our lives are for and how we should be living them, then the place to start is not the self-help section at Barnes & Noble, nor the latest life hack on TikTok. We look to Jesus. We look at Jesus.

But I’ll be honest: I find it very hard to look at Jesus once we come to His arrest and trial and crucifixion – it’s just so terrible, the innocent suffering of Jesus. Anytime I’m watching some “life of Jesus” movie on TV, once all that starts happening I’m changing the channel. I even find it very hard to read out loud from the pulpit the story of His arrest and crucifixion, like we do at the Maundy Thursday/Tenebrae service each year. And such was the case this week, as I wrestled with our Scripture lesson in preparing to write this sermon. Jesus being denied by Peter, Jesus being mocked and beaten by the guards, Jesus rejected and condemned at a crooked trial in front of a rigged jury. I kept wanting to avert my eyes and look elsewhere, look for something else in this story to focus on other than the innocent suffering of Jesus.

But as I averted my eyes from Jesus and His innocent suffering, the only other thing I could see in this story was who it was who was inflicting that suffering upon Him. Peter, who had promised even to die with Jesus, instead denying even knowing Jesus. The guards – those nameless figures who seem to relish the opportunity they have been given to humiliate and beat their prisoner, even before His trial. And then the council of the elders of the people of God – those who should have best known who it really was standing before them – and instead choosing to condemn Him. Even more, to reject Him. To say “no” to the One who had come in fulfillment of all the promises God’s people had held dear for centuries before. To say “no” to the One who really was their hope and their salvation.

And in thinking these thoughts, in having averted my eyes from the suffering of Jesus to those who were inflicting His suffering, it dawned on me. It dawned on me – the deeper importance of this passage. That yes, in looking upon Jesus we see who we are meant to be. But that in looking upon Peter, upon the guards, upon the council of the elders, we see who we really are. We see what we have become, in spite of what God intends for us to be. In looking upon Peter’s failure, the cruelty of the guards, the council’s condemnation, we see who we truly are, the state we are actually in. And we see the very reason why it is that we so desperately, deeply, needed Jesus to come. Why we so desperately, deeply need Jesus still – and everything that He accomplished for us in His arrest and trial and crucifixion.

Look at Peter. Just a few hours earlier, while seated at the table of the Last Supper, Peter had declared in no uncertain terms that he would never, ever deny Jesus, no matter what might be about to happen. He had even gone so far as to proclaim that he was not only willing to go to prison with Jesus, but to die with Him.³ And now, just a few hours later, with events unfolding just as Jesus had foretold, what does Peter do? Three times, three times. The first time we might attribute it to him having been caught by surprise by the servant girl’s accusation. But the second and third times, when he had had opportunity to consider his reply more carefully, what does he do? *“I don’t know the man!”* And immediately after that third denial, just as Jesus had also foretold, the rooster crows. And, says our text, at that very moment Jesus looked out from the place where He was being held. Jesus turned His head and looked directly at Peter. And in that moment, in that look from our Lord, it all suddenly became clear to Peter. *“And he went out,”* says our text, *“and wept bitterly.”*

We see ourselves in Peter – at least, we should. Or, rather, we see ourselves in Jesus looking at Peter. With that look, Peter could no longer escape what he had done, no longer pretend to be other than what he really was. And in that look we, too, are laid bare before our Lord – because it is a reminder that He sees us also as we really are, even as His gaze forces us to see ourselves as we really are. We do a good job of hiding the less savory aspects of our being from one another. We do a good job of curating what we let others see and think about us. Trying to control our public image.

But when Jesus looks at us, He sees the whole picture, the true picture. He doesn’t just see the things we are hiding behind – the job, the bank account, the club membership, the social standing, the charitable activities. He doesn’t just see the things we are hiding behind; He sees all the things that we are hiding. He sees the worst things we have done. He sees the worst aspects of our personality. In fact, He sees us more clearly than we see ourselves. He sees the little lies we cling to, the streak of selfishness that hinders and hurts all whom we love, the petty grievances and collected grudges. He sees us through and through. And, in so doing, He makes us – like Peter, in that moment – see ourselves as we really are, and not as we think we are, not as we pretend to be. His gaze is unblinking upon us – *“O God, to whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid . . .”*⁴ He sees what broken, sometimes even somewhat rotten, sinners we really are. In looking at Peter, we see ourselves as we really are.

And then there are the guards – we see ourselves in the guards, or at least we should. Maybe it was only a few of them who were truly being cruel – glad for the opportunity to degrade and harm another human being. But, even so, that wouldn’t excuse those among the guards who

just stood by and watched – maybe thinking this was not right, but too scared of being labelled weak to intervene. Like how we stand by and say nothing, do nothing, when someone says something we know is both untrue and unkind; or when someone does something mean-spirited and unjust and we do nothing to stop it from happening.

What we see in the behavior of the guards is how readily we are willing to drop the idea that we are our brother's keeper as soon as it might cost us something.⁵ How quickly we are able to just write off and ignore the fellow humanity of a fellow human being – to treat them instead as a despised label or as an unwelcome category. As not one of us – and therefore someone we don't have to care about or care for. And therefore someone we can ignore, abuse, insult, treat as a "them" instead of as an "us."

And let us not deceive ourselves about this – maybe we are not the ones beating Him, maybe we are not the ones actually mocking Him to His face – but we let it happen, we let things like this happen every day to those made in His image. For every day it happens whenever people forget, whenever we forget, that every single other person we deal with, this world deals with – every single other person is a beautiful, fragile reflection of our Savior. And therefore to be respected and cherished. To be treated with compassion, kindness, and dignity – and never, ever with contempt or indifference or meanness.⁶ Looking at the guards, we see our own complicity in the cruelties of this world. We see that indifference towards the humanity of others which lives somewhere inside us all.

And then there is the council of the elders, the religious leadership. Faithfully praying day and night that the Messiah should come and set them free. And now He has come. And now He actually stands before them. And what do they do? A mockery of a trial – not to mention the very absurdity of fallen creatures thinking they have any right to stand in judgment over their Creator. A mockery of a trial – to give them the flimsiest of excuses to reject Him. To condemn Him. To send Him to Pilate to be crucified. These were the religious leaders, the devout – how could they not have seen Him for who He really was? How could they remain unconvinced after all the miracles, all the healings, all the Words that He had spoken straight into the depths of their hearts?

Ah, but we do know why – because that same basic, fundamental flaw in their lives is in us also. Ever since Adam and Eve it has lived in each and every human being.⁷ This rejection of God. This steadfast resistance to His presence in our lives. This desire just to brush Him aside whenever He would instead lay claim to the throne of our hearts. We may cry out to Him in trouble, reaching out for Him as our Savior. But how often do we pray to Him, truly pray to Him, "*Not my will, but thine, be done*"⁸ – and so acknowledge Him as our Lord?

Sin – capital letter S Sin, that's what it is in Adam and Eve and the religious leaders and in you and in me and in everybody everywhere always. Not so much the little things we daily ought not to do but do anyway, or ought to do but do not do anyway. But the real problem, the real capital letter S problem of Sin in our souls: that, deep down, in our heart of hearts, we do not think we need Him to be our God. And that we do not want Him to take full control over any aspect of our lives as our God. That we, quite simply, we like to go on being the pretend little gods and goddesses of our own little realm of me, myself, and I. Saying "no" to Him the moment He starts messing with our lives as we have made them to be. Just like it says in Judges 17:6: "*In those*

days . . . everyone did what was right in his or her own eyes.” That is intended by the Bible as a powerful condemnation of something which has gone profoundly wrong in the human heart. We, in our capital letter S Sin see it as just simply how it is supposed to be. You do you and I’ll do me – what’s God got to do with any of it anyway? Like the council of elders, let’s kick God to the curb – except on Sunday mornings, of course – and then get on with life our way. Looking at that council of elders rejecting Jesus, we see also ourselves doing the same.

Well, I began by saying that I just had to avert my eyes from the innocent suffering of Jesus in our passage – which is how it came to pass that I turned my eyes instead to those who were inflicting that suffering upon Jesus. As it turns out, and maybe you will now agree, that to look and see ourselves in Peter, in the guards, and in the council of elders, has turned out to be even worse than looking upon the suffering of Jesus. Again, if in Jesus Christ we see who we are meant to be as human beings – then, in Peter, in the guards, and in the council of elders we see who we really are instead. We see ourselves as we really are before God. But so also we see why it is that we so deeply and desperately needed a Savior – need Jesus to be our Savior.

So I turned my eyes back to Jesus in His suffering. But having now seen myself in Peter and in the guards and in the council of elders as they deny, mock, and reject Jesus – when I turned my eyes back to Jesus, what I see now is not so much His suffering. Having seen myself in those inflicting suffering upon Jesus, what I see now is not so much His pain, nor His humiliation, nor His rejection. What I see now, when I turn back again to Jesus, is not those things – but the reason why He bore those things, endured those things, willingly suffered these things, for me and for you and for us all. I see in that denied, mocked, and rejected form the figure of One willing to undergo all of this, all of this and the cross besides, all of this for the love of me. All for the love of you. All for the love and redemption of all His denying, mocking, rejecting children.⁹

What I see now as He turns to look at Peter is that it was not merely about looking upon Peter’s failure and our own. That what that look of Jesus also reveals, truly reveals, is what Jesus truly sees in Peter even in that terrible moment, and what Jesus truly sees in you and me even in our worst moments. What He is looking upon, what He sees as He looks at Peter in that moment, as He looks at us in our own moments – is someone whom He loves more even than life itself. Someone He loves enough willingly to undergo all of those sufferings. Someone He loves enough to die upon a cross to redeem, to restore to Himself, to rescue from being lost to Him for all eternity.

And the guards beating Him, mocking Him – as I look again at Jesus, I see through His suffering clear through to that great truth which Peter himself once put down, pen to parchment: that love, His love for us, is *“able to cover a multitude of sins.”*¹⁰ And the council of elders rejecting Him, condemning Him, basically blaspheming Him – as I look again at Jesus suffering this agony, what I see now is the great determination which lives at the very heart of God, the very will of God: that nothing should ever be able to separate us from His love, the love of God in Jesus, ever again. Because that this is why He came to this earth in the first place – so that not even our sin should be allowed to separate us from His love.¹¹ That not even our rejection of Him should be allowed to stand in the way of His great, eternal, long-suffering, and unfailing love for us.

In other words, what I now see in Jesus denied, mocked, and rejected is the great truth that He came to this earth, in love, to save us even from ourselves.

¹ John Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion, Vol. 1, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), pp. 36-37, I.1.i.

² Acts 17:26.

³ Luke 22:33.

⁴ An ancient prayer of the church, dating back to somewhere in the 10th century.

⁵ Genesis 4:9.

⁶ N. T. Wright, Luke for Everyone (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), p. 273.

⁷ Genesis 3:1:24.

⁸ Luke 22:42.

⁹ John 3:16.

¹⁰ I Peter 4:8.

¹¹ Romans 8:31-39.