

The Gospel of Matthew

Lesson 35: Before the Council; Peter's Denial -- Matthew 26:57-75

It is the middle of the night, and two trials are happening at once. Inside the house of Caiaphas the high priest, the most innocent man who ever lived stands before a court that has already decided to kill Him (vv. 57-59). Outside in the courtyard, by a charcoal fire, His most outspoken disciple is on trial too, though no one has charged him with anything. One trial is loud, official, rigged with false witnesses. The other is quiet, almost accidental, sparked by a servant girl. And Matthew tells them both together, because together they reveal everything.

Watch the council first. They are looking for false testimony so they can put Jesus to death, and at first they cannot even get their lies to agree (vv. 59-60). When the false witnesses finally stumble forward, Jesus stays silent, fulfilling the ancient picture of the Servant who "opened not his mouth" (Isaiah 53:7). The trial is a sham. The verdict was reached before the first witness spoke. Justice itself is on trial here, and it is losing.

Then the high priest plays his final card. He puts Jesus under oath: "I adjure you by the living God, tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God" (v. 63). And now Jesus speaks. He will not be silent about who He is. "You have said so," He answers, and then adds a claim that tears the high priest's robes: "From now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven" (v. 64). It is the good confession, made under oath, at the cost of His life. They condemn Him, spit in His face, and strike Him.

And all the while, out in the courtyard, Peter is unraveling. A servant girl points at him, and the man who swore he would die for Jesus says, "I do not know what you mean" (v. 70). A second accusation, a sharper denial with an oath. A third, and Peter calls down curses on himself: "I do not know the man" (v. 74). Then the rooster crows, and Jesus' words come flooding back, and the strongest of the disciples goes out into the dark and weeps bitterly. Two confessions, one faithful unto death and one collapsing in fear. Tonight we will sit with both, and find that there is grace even for the courtyard.

Group Discussion: Matthew tells the story of Jesus' trial and Peter's denial side by side, cutting back and forth between the two. What do you think he wants us to see by placing the faithful confession of Jesus and the fearful denial of Peter right next to each other?

Personal Reflection: Peter denied Jesus not before a court but before a servant girl by a fire, in a small, low-stakes moment. Where are you most likely to quietly distance yourself from Christ, not in some dramatic test, but in ordinary conversations where it would simply be easier to stay silent or blend in?

Read Matthew 26:57-75

Study Questions

1. The council “were seeking false testimony against Jesus that they might put him to death” (v. 59), and the verdict was settled before the evidence. What does this rigged trial reveal about the human heart’s resistance to Jesus, and about the kind of world He came to save?
2. Through most of the trial Jesus “remained silent” (v. 63) under false accusation, refusing to defend Himself. When you are wrongly accused or misunderstood, how do you respond, and what would it look like to entrust yourself to God the way Jesus did?
3. When the high priest puts Him under oath, Jesus openly confesses, “You have said so,” and declares He is the Son of Man who will sit at God’s right hand and come on the clouds (v. 64). What is Jesus claiming about His identity and authority in this answer?
4. Jesus made the good confession even though it would cost Him His life. Where is it costly for you to openly acknowledge that Jesus is the Christ, and what holds you back from confessing Him as boldly as He confessed the truth about Himself?
5. The high priest tears his robes and cries “blasphemy,” and the council condemns Jesus to death for claiming to be the Christ, the Son of God (vv. 65–66). Why does everything hinge on whether that claim is true, and what difference does it make that Jesus is exactly who He said He is?
6. Jesus was spat upon, struck, and mocked after His confession (vv. 67–68), and He bore it without retaliating. When following Christ brings you ridicule or rejection, how do you usually react, and how does Jesus’ example reshape the way you want to respond?

7. Peter had sworn he would never fall away, yet he denied Jesus three times, each denial stronger than the last (vv. 70, 72, 74). What does the progression of Peter's denial teach us about how even sincere believers fall, and how sin gains momentum once it begins?
8. Peter wept bitterly when the rooster crowed and he remembered Jesus' words (v. 75). Think of a time you failed the Lord. What is the difference between the kind of sorrow that crushes us into despair and the kind that leads us back to God?
9. This passage holds together Jesus' faithful confession that He is the Christ, the Son of God, under oath and at the cost of His life, and Peter's denial and bitter weeping. What does Jesus' good confession teach us about who He is and what we must confess, and what does Peter's fall and the way back teach us about overconfidence, repentance, and restoration?
10. Look back over the whole scene, from Jesus' faithful confession to Peter's bitter tears. Name one specific way the Jesus you have met here, the faithful witness who confessed the truth for you, is shaping how you confess Him, how you handle your own failures, and how you find your way back to Him this week.

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: Isaiah 53:7, the Servant who was oppressed and afflicted yet opened not His mouth; Daniel 7:13–14, the Son of Man coming on the clouds to receive an everlasting kingdom; 1 Timothy 6:12–13, Christ Jesus making the good confession before Pontius Pilate, and our call to do the same; Luke 22:31–32, 61–62, Jesus' prayer that Peter's faith would not fail and His look that broke Peter's heart; 2 Corinthians 7:10, godly grief that produces repentance leading to salvation.