

Rock Bottom (or, Sin, Conviction, and Repentance)

Mark 14:66-72

Introduction: I shared a story with you before that was told by Max Lucado, who you may know was a missionary in Brazil before he became a pastor. The story is about...

... a young teenaged girl named Christina. She lived in a little one room house, in a small dusty village in Brazil. She was bored with life in such simplicity and poverty and longed for the excitement of the big city of Rio.

One morning her mother Maria found Christina's bed empty. Maria knew immediately where her daughter had gone. She also knew the dangers that a pretty young girl faced in the city, so she quickly threw some clothes in a bag, gathered up what little money she had, and headed for the bus station. On her way, the mom entered one of those photograph booths in a local drug store and took pictures of herself. She put the pictures in her purse and took the next bus to Rio de Janeiro. When she arrived, she began looking, all the while she put up pictures of herself all over town, in a phone booth, on a bulletin board, on a bathroom mirror. Each had a note written on the back. But she couldn't find her daughter, and soon her money and the pictures ran out, and Maria got back on the bus and wept all the way home, fearing she would never see her daughter again.

Many weeks later, Christina slowly walked down the hotel stairs. She was already worn down by life. Her young face was tired. Her brown eyes no longer danced with youth but spoke of pain and fear. A thousand times over she longed to leave behind the beds and hotel rooms and to go back home, but how could she? She remembered the warm secure feeling of love and acceptance she had experienced back with her mom in their little village. But she thought it was too late to turn back...

Christina had hit rock bottom. Not all of us get to that point, thankfully, but we all experience trials and failures along the way, even after coming to faith in Christ. Today we'll look at the story of a man who in a real sense did "hit rock bottom." If we are right that Mark is recording the reminiscences of Peter, then we must conclude that Peter told this story on himself! He holds himself up as a negative example, warning us how easily we can drift off course, spiritually speaking. This is pretty close to shipwreck, as Peter, the Rock, hits "rock bottom." Even though it is night, though he moved from the fire to the shadows, his sin is exposed, and it cut to heart. He responds in brokenness, and in the end, in repentance and faith.

The *Maine Idea:** Whatever we have done, God's grace is greater than our sin, and if we confess, repent, and believe, we can be restored.

I. The Danger of Conforming: Conforming to the world will lead us to sin (14:54; 66-67a). I like the J.B. Phillips paraphrase of Romans 12:1, "*Don't let the world force you into its mold!*" Let's look back for a moment to 14:54 and remember the scene that Mark had set for us... Peter was nearby, in the courtyard, sitting next to a guard, warming himself by the fire, while Jesus is taken inside and interrogated...

...Peter had followed him at a distance, right into the courtyard of the high priest. And he was sitting with the guards and warming himself at the fire.

We have to acknowledge some courage on Peter's part as at least he is following, albeit, at a distance. Mark doesn't give us the detail that John is there as well, and being acquainted with

someone in the household, it is he who gets them into the courtyard. But Mark is telling the story from Peter's perspective, and wants us to know that he was there, and followed right into the High Priest's courtyard. And so there he is, sitting with the guards, and warming himself by the fire. Why was he there? Curiosity? Hoping against hope that Jesus would do something to turn the situation around? Sitting with the guards, by the fire, whatever his motive, seems to show that he was content for the moment at least to blend into the crowd, to be a secret follower of Jesus. Better not to attract attention to himself. But then, we read in Mark 14:66-67a...

⁶⁶ And as Peter was below in the courtyard, one of the servant girls of the high priest came, ⁶⁷ and seeing Peter warming himself...

Peter's plans are disrupted as a servant girl sees him and comes over for a closer look! When he saw her lock eyes and walk toward him, did he fear that suddenly he was in danger, that he was about to be exposed, that he would have to make a choice? Sin is always a choice, for which we are responsible. Amazingly, Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. Before we judge Peter, let's be honest: Have you been guilty of staying in the shadows, blending into the world, maybe even trying not to be recognized as a Christian? You might think, is that really sin? It's not like I did anything! Either did Peter... yet. There are sins of commission and sins of omission, but they are still sin, they fall short of God's will. If we conform to the world rather than following Jesus, we cross the line. We're not loving Him with our whole heart. Peter sinned, haven't you? Here's the "Good News" implicit in this Gospel: Whatever we have done, God's grace is greater than our sin, and if we confess, repent, and believe, we can be restored. Peter, the Rock, was crumbling a bit, but he hadn't yet hit "Rock Bottom." As the story continues, we see...

II. The Downward Spiral of Sin: Conformity will lead us away from Jesus (67b-68).

...she looked at him and said, "You also were with the Nazarene, Jesus." ⁶⁸ But he denied it, saying, "I neither know nor understand what you mean." And he went out into the gateway and the rooster crowed.

The servant girl came over and one translation says, "...she looked closely at him..." The word translated "looked" is a compound form of the verb, and seems to have the sense of looking closely at someone, with recognition or discernment. Mark used it only three times before this: 1) of the blind man who had been healed (8:25), suddenly "seeing clearly," 2) of Jesus looking at the rich young ruler (10:21), when "seeing him, he loved him," and invited him to become a follower; and 3) of Jesus looking at his astonished disciples and instructing them when the young ruler walked away (10:27). He knew their hearts, the ruler, the disciples, the healed man—the idea is to look intently. Here in our passage, the young girl, who hadn't recognized Peter before, looks closely, recognizes, and exposes him!

Remember the context, the false witnesses who testified against Jesus had failed to get their stories right, they contradicted each other, they couldn't corroborate their false charges even with the minimum of two or three witnesses required by the Law. Jesus, like a lamb led to slaughter (Isa 53:8) remained silent. There was no need to respond to those false witnesses! And then the high priest asks Him directly, "Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?" And Jesus, the one True Witness, knowing what the response would be, said "I AM... Son of God, Son of Man..." That is the context, lying false witnesses, and the One who is the Truth.

Now, Peter had a choice to make. He had managed to blend into the crowd, and to go unnoticed for a time as Jesus was interrogated by his enemies. But now he is confronted by this servant girl. Would he stand up and speak the truth? Until now, he was “conforming,” blending in, silent and unnoticed. In contrast to Jesus who spoke the truth despite the consequences, Peter now compounds his sin by lying—he becomes a false witness...

“I neither know nor understand what you mean.” The expression was an emphatic way of saying “I have no idea what you are talking about!” In contrast to Jesus, who was the true and faithful witness, Peter fails for the first time in this sequence, emphatically denying that he was a follower of Jesus. Do you remember God’s words to Cain, *“...sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is for you, but you must rule over it...”* (Gen 4:7). Jesus had told Peter in the garden to *“Watch and pray, lest you fall into temptation.”* Indeed, sin was crouching at the door! Luke relates this exchange between Jesus and Peter...

³¹ *“Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, ³² but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned again, strengthen your brothers.”* ³³ *Peter said to him, “Lord, I am ready to go with you both to prison and to death.”* ³⁴ *Jesus said, “I tell you, Peter, the rooster will not crow this day, until you deny three times that you know me.”* (Luke 22:31-34).

Did you get that, “When you have turned again...” Jesus is anticipating Peter’s failure, and his restoration! Mark tells us that after Jesus prayed and the disciples slept in Gethsemane, Jesus woke Peter and warned him, *“Simon, are you asleep? Could you not watch one hour? ³⁸ Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation...”* (Mark 14:37-38). Watch and pray. Stay alert, and look to God for help! So now, in the moment of testing, Peter, who had been so self-confident, stumbles. He says, *“I have no idea what you are talking about!”* And...

“...he went out into the entry way...” [and into the shadows...]. Instead of identifying with Jesus, and standing up for the One who was willingly suffering injustice at the hands of men so that he (and we!) could be justified before God, Peter moves away, away from the light of the fire... and away from the Light of the World, going out into the entranceway. Men love darkness rather than light, lest their deeds be exposed. Sin tends to compound itself over time. Remember the old Arab proverb, *“Do not let the Camel’s nose in the tent, his body will surely follow!”* We need to watch and pray, knowing that we are in a spiritual battle. And if we stumble along the way, know that He is waiting for us to return, and that whatever we have done, God’s grace is greater than our sin, and if we confess, repent, and believe, we can be restored. Peter doesn’t yet seem to realize what he just did, even as the rooster crowed for the first time (v.68).

III. The Danger of Distancing ourselves from God: It can lead to compounding our sin, and even to denying the faith (69-71).

⁶⁹ *And the servant girl saw him and began again to say to the bystanders, “This man is one of them.”* ⁷⁰ *But again he denied it. And after a little while the bystanders again said to Peter, “Certainly you are one of them, for you are a Galilean.”* ⁷¹ *But he began to invoke a curse on himself and to swear, “I do not know this man of whom you speak.”*

The servant girl doesn’t so easily give up, and though Peter adamantly denied knowing Jesus, she is convinced, and begins to talk to the bystanders in and around the courtyard. Peter had spoken enough that they picked up his accent, and he wasn’t from New Jersey, or Judea, he

was from away, a Galilean like Jesus of Nazareth! So, Peter denies the accusation a second and a third time. The language gets increasingly intense, and the third is the strongest. The English translations can mislead us a little, the idea is not that Peter is using profanity, but he is “swearing” as someone under oath, and “evoking a curse,” using the verbal form of the word “anathema,” let him be accursed who would say such a thing (see Gal 1:6-8)! The translations take him to be speaking reflexively, of himself, “May I be accursed if I am one of His followers!” Think about that! The only way of being delivered from the curse is to know and follow Him! Jesus endured that for us, He drank the cup of God’s wrath, so that we could experience blessing rather than the curse! Peter, “*the Rock*,” hits rock bottom, just as Jesus had predicted he would.

But God isn’t finished with Peter. In between Jesus predicting the scattering of the disciples and predicting the denials of Peter, He said in Mark 14:28, “*But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee.*” In other words, “You will all leave me—you too Peter—but I still have a plan for you, my grace is greater than your sin. I will die, yes, but I’ll rise again, and go before you to Galilee!” Though we stumble we shall not be utterly cast down. Whatever we have done, God’s grace is greater than our sin, and if we confess, repent, and believe, we can be restored.

IV. Conviction and Repentance: God will use His Word, and even circumstances, to expose our sin (72; cf. Luke 22:60-62). We read in v.72,

⁷² ...And immediately the rooster crowed a second time. And Peter remembered how Jesus had said to him, "Before the rooster crows twice, you will deny me three times." And he broke down and wept.

“*Immediately*,” making it impossible for Peter to miss the connection, the rooster crows for the second time. Unlike the first sounding of the rooster, after his first denial, this time Peter “*remembers*” what Jesus had said! And it pierces his soul, it cuts to his heart, and he is broken. Have you been there? Have you gotten to that point? The Rock who once said, after Jesus had predicted his three denials, “*If I must die with you, I will not deny you...*” (Mark 14:31), had, that same night, denied Him, not once, but three times! Luke adds one detail to his account that makes the moment even more poignant. We read in Luke 22:60-62,

⁶⁰ But Peter said, "Man, I do not know what you are talking about." And immediately, while he was still speaking, the rooster crowed. ⁶¹ And the Lord turned and looked at Peter. And Peter remembered the saying of the Lord, how he had said to him, "Before the rooster crows today, you will deny me three times." ⁶² And he went out and wept bitterly.

The additional detail of the Lord turning and looking at Peter, across the courtyard, certainly adds to the pathos of the moment. Peter suddenly knew what he had done, and he also knew that the Lord knew what he had done! Have you heard the newsreel of the Hindenburg disaster? “Oh, the humanity!” Peter was crashing and burning, he had done what he said would never do, what he thought he could never do, he had denied his Lord! I don’t know if you have had a Hindenburg moment in your life, or even just a few “fender benders” along the way. But the Bible tells us all sin is an offense to God, it separates us from Him, apart from Christ it leaves us guilty and deserving of judgment. Thank God that Jesus came into the world to save sinners, that He endured injustice at the hands of men so that we could be justified before God!

What is God saying to me in this passage? The Main Idea we can take from this story is that we will all, at one time or the other, stumble. But know this: whatever we have done, whatever we have become, God's grace is greater than our sin, and if we confess, repent, and believe, we can be restored.

What would God have me to do in response to this passage? Peter stumbled, maybe you feel that you have too. But God wasn't finished with Peter. Remember Christina? She had hit rock bottom, as Max Lucado tells the story...

...A thousand times over she longed to go back home. Yes, they were poor, but Christina remembered the warm secure feeling of love and acceptance she had experienced back with her mom in their little village. But she thought it was too late to turn back. As she reached the bottom of the stairs, her eyes noticed a familiar face. She looked again, and there on the lobby mirror was a small picture of her mother. Christina's eyes burned and her throat tightened as she walked across the room and removed the small photo. Written on the back were these words: "Whatever you have done, whatever you have become, it doesn't matter. Please come home."

And she did! Like the father in the story of the prodigal son, watching the horizon for his son to return, like Maria searching the streets of Rio for Christina, God is waiting for each of us to come home, to return to Him in repentance and faith, as Peter later does. Whatever we've done, whatever we've become, God's grace is greater than our sin. If we confess, repent, and believe, we can be restored.

If you have not trusted Christ as your Savior you may be thinking "There is no way God could forgive someone like me, you have no idea what I have done!" You're right, I don't know your heart, but God does know everything about you and me. Even so, He spared not the Son, but delivered Him up for us all. Horatio Spafford wrote, "*My sin, oh the bliss of this glorious thought, my sin, not in part but the whole, is nailed to the Cross and I bear it no more! Praise the Lord, Praise the Lord, Oh my soul!*" The Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all - He bore our sins in His body on the cross - He did that for you. The price has been paid and the gift is offered, will you trust Him, and receive Him? And believer, think of what this means... Jesus knew Peter's failure even before it happened. And He know us. That is why He came. Whatever you have done, His invitation stands, please, come home... AMEN.