

“Church Failure”
Matthew 26:47-56
January 19, 2020

INTRODUCTION:

In the events leading up to Jesus’ crucifixion, everyone fails him, Jew and Gentile alike. We are all familiar with the failings of the Jewish nation, as her leaders succeeded in their longtime desire to be rid of this one who was disrupting their lives. We are also familiar with the failings of the Roman government, the civil authority that should have stepped in to bring about justice by standing against this great injustice of crucifying an innocent man. But Matthew doesn’t begin with either the Jews or the Romans, but with the church, with Jesus’ disciples. One disciple betrays Jesus. Another foolishly defends him, and almost destroys the entire church in the process. Finally, all the disciples flee when it becomes apparent that Jesus is not going to use his power to bring judgment upon those against him. Jesus’ disciples fail him in three ways, and a closer look at these failures shows us more clearly the love and power of our Savior. And as we see the love and power of Jesus, we are equipped to avoid such failures.

I. Fake Discipleship

Judas is the fake disciple, betraying Jesus with a kiss. While Jesus was praying in Gethsemane, Judas had been busy. He now returns with what Matthew describes as **“a great crowd with swords and clubs, from the chief priests and the elders of the people”** (v. 47). There is irony here, as this large crowd comes armed with swords and clubs to arrest the one who created wood and metal, and the one who created the arms wielding the clubs and swords. It is nighttime, and this crowd sent to arrest Jesus need some way to identify him. Judas anticipates the need and informs them that they will know whom to arrest when they see him greet the right one with a kiss. Matthew uses an intensifier in the verb translated “kiss,” indicating that this was an affectionate kiss, perhaps even a lingering one. To any observer, the conclusion would naturally be drawn that Judas loved Jesus deeply.

Why a kiss? Why not something less intimate? Why not simply point to Jesus and say, “That’s the one—arrest him”? I don’t know. But I do know that this must have added to Jesus’ pain and grief. Here was a man who had been one of his close associates for over three years. They had suffered together, worshipped together, eaten numerous meals with one another and walked countless miles side by side. King David gives voice to what Jesus must have been feeling. **“For it is not an enemy who taunts me—then I could bear it; it is not an adversary who deals insolently with me—then I could hide**

from him. But it is you, a man, my equal, my companion, my familiar friend. We used to take sweet counsel together; within God's house we walked in the throng" (Psalm 55:12-14). It is one thing for a known enemy to attack, and quite another for opposition to arise from one we considered a close friend. Judas even continues the charade of acting as a close friend as he stabs Jesus in the back.

George Herbert has a deeply moving and lengthy poem about the sufferings and death of Jesus called *The Sacrifice*. The voice of Jesus speaks in every stanza, with each one featuring a different component of Jesus' suffering. Then every stanza ends with the haunting refrain, "Was ever grief like mine?" The stanza about Judas' betrayal reads as follows: "Judas, dost thou betray me with a kiss? Canst thou find hell about my lips? And miss of life, just at the gates of life and bliss?" Herbert imagines Jesus looking at Judas and asking, "How did I become the path to hell for you? As you have been with me, you have been with the source of all life and bliss. How could you have missed this?"

This is the case with all fake discipleship. Fake disciples have been close to Jesus, the gate to all life and bliss. They have even given an outward show of affection to Jesus, while their hearts remain far from him. It is a dangerous thing to fake love for Jesus.

II. Power Grabbing

A second failure among Jesus' disciples is the power grab, seen in the drawing of the sword to defend Jesus. Matthew doesn't identify this disciple, but John is not so silent in his account, telling us what doesn't surprise at all, that Peter was the one wielding the sword. Before Jesus can stop him, he manages to take a swing with it, aiming for the head of the one closest to him, one of the servants of the high priest. Whether this servant moved or Peter's aim was poor, he missed his intended target but did manage a glancing blow that removed the man's ear. I imagine that it was only the intervention of Jesus that kept all the disciples from being wiped out before the church could even get started. They would certainly have been no match for this great crowd who came to arrest Jesus, a crowd that included some armed Roman soldiers. But Jesus did manage to calm things down, reining in Peter's rashness and telling him to put his sword away. Luke tells us that he also performed another miracle, restoring the ear of the high priest's servant.

The slicing off of the servant's ear is clearly meant to be taken literally, but I wonder if Matthew also intends a figurative meaning. It has certainly been the case historically that the Church has resorted to earthly power in order to bring about the mission of Jesus, with the result that ears to hear the gospel have been removed. The Crusades, though well-intentioned, are just such an

example. For centuries after that effort to take back the Holy Land for the followers of Christ, the ears of Muslims were cut off from hearing the gospel. The Inquisition of the medieval church is another example of this misuse of power. Is it possible that the demise of the church in Europe today is due in part to the effect of this in cutting off the ears of many Europeans to the gospel?

Jesus tells Peter, **“Put your sword back in its place”** (v. 52). Jesus acknowledges that there is a place for the sword. The rest of the New Testament tells us, though, that its place now is with the civil authorities, not the Church. Christians can serve as policemen and members of the military, using force in pursuit of that call. But the Church is not authorized by Jesus to use such power. The Church has at times failed in this on both the left and right of the political divide. Back in the 1960’s, there was a theological movement called “Liberation Theology.” It considered the exodus under Moses as a pattern for God’s work today. So it aligned itself with several Marxist attempts at overthrowing governments it considered oppressive. Ten years later, Billy Graham aligned himself closely with Richard Nixon, a decision he later regretted and admitted was unwise. Individual Christians are certainly permitted and even encouraged to be politically active, but we must avoid dragging the church into political activism, whether it’s on the right or the left.

Jesus gives two reasons for denying the power of the sword to his people. The first one is quite practical. **“For all who take the sword will perish by the sword”** (v. 52). The sword cuts both ways, so to speak. It can bring success in getting your way, until someone comes along with a bigger sword. And someone always comes along.

The second reason Jesus gives for denying the power of the sword to his people is more significant. It is simply that a greater power is available to us. We are to put our swords away in order to pick up this greater power. Jesus speaks of this greater power in verse 53. **“Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels?”** A Roman legion consisted of six thousand soldiers. When God brought judgment upon the firstborn of Egypt, he sent one angel. Imagine what twelve times six thousand could do, one legion for each of the remaining eleven disciples and another for Jesus. All of this could have been accomplished by a mere word from Jesus, and it would have been instantaneous. The word of Jesus is powerful. Then Jesus goes on to explain why he will not call on angel rescuers. **“But how then should the Scriptures be fulfilled, that it must be so?”** And then he closes by saying again, **“But all this has taken place that the Scriptures of the prophets might be fulfilled”** (v. 56). This shows us that our real power lies in the Scriptures and the words of Jesus.

The way Matthew tells this story highlights the power of Jesus’ words. Notice in particular the important little word “then” in verse 50. Jesus had said

to Judas, **“Friend, do what you came to do”** (v. 50). **“Then they came up and laid hands on Jesus and seized him.”** It is Jesus’ word that triggers his arrest. The mob can do nothing until Jesus says so. They think they have all the power, but it is only after his word is spoken that they are free to act.

The reason Jesus tells the Church to put down the sword is not because he wants us to have no power. He wants us to have even greater power, so we must put down the lesser power of the sword in order to pick up the greater power of the sword of his word. As Christians, we don’t have to grab for power because there is a power that we merely receive. It is the power of God’s word. The literal sword can make a person do something they don’t want to do, but only the power of Jesus’ word can change a person’s heart to want to do what they should do.

Today, the Church has an angry mob approaching us with clubs and swords. It is the power of secularization, and they are determined not to stop until we all become converts to their values and beliefs. And they are not afraid to use the sword to accomplish their goals. How should we respond? The temptation is to do what Peter did, to pick up a sword and lash out. Most don’t lash out with a literal sword. But we often strike others with the sword of anger and condemnation. We lecture them to tell them how wrong they are. What would Jesus have us do? He would urge us to put down all such swords and to renew our confidence in his mighty power. He is so powerful that he can win by losing, which is exactly what happened at his crucifixion. Just when his enemies thought they had won by putting him to death, he was raised from the dead and began a movement that would outlast Israel, Rome and every other human government. It is a movement that moves forward on such powerful weapons as prayer, God’s word and deeds of love and mercy. It is a power suited to God’s grace. By it God’s enemies are defeated by being converted into his friends.

Let’s apply this before moving to our third point. Are there ways you have followed Peter by taking out your sword and seizing power? Perhaps it’s just by trying to control people and situations. Or maybe your sword is in the form of angry complaints or rants and raves on social media. Maybe you have resorted to demonizing or ridiculing your opponents. All such efforts will not succeed because they depend on our strength. What’s needed is Jesus’ power, and that power will never be available to us as long as we are holding on to our own. We refrain from grabbing power not to become powerless, but in order to receive the greater power of Jesus and his word.

III. Fleeing Suffering

When it becomes clear to the disciples that Jesus is not going to respond to this threat with an overt demonstration of force, they panic. That doesn’t

surprise me. I see in myself the same tendency, responding to threats initially by some form of self-trust. But when that fails, as Peter's drawn sword failed him, I retreat into fear and despair. These disciples, who just a few hours prior to this had declared to Jesus that they would never desert him, all flee in panicked fear.

So the disciples fail Jesus, adding to his grief. But still greater grief lies ahead for Jesus. He speaks of it in his famous cry, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" He will be all alone, forsaken by the church and forsaken by his Father. He endured such grief for you and me. He was forsaken that you and I may never be forsaken. He was all alone that we will never have to be. He did not fail us that we might be received back after our failures of him. He became sin that we might become the righteousness of God.

CONCLUSION:

This passage suggests to us three things that are important as we face those enemies who are coming at us as a great crowd with swords and clubs. First, we must meet the challenges before us with courage and hope. There is every reason for such hope because Jesus has all power. He has promised that his church will prevail. He has said that he will never leave us or forsake us. He is even now on his throne in heaven ruling all things. There is every reason for us to face this world with hope and courage. We speak up when it is difficult to do so because our dependence is in Jesus and not in ourselves. We act for justice and mercy because we have absolute confidence in the power of Jesus.

Second, we must change the narrative of fear and anger that is so prevalent in the church today. This narrative is also present outside the church, in our nation as a whole. An underlying narrative affects behavior. Everybody is angry at everybody else. Republicans are angry at Democrats, and vice versa. Our civil discourse has devolved into name calling and shouting. As Christians, our narrative must not be that of fear and anger, for the reasons we have seen in this passage. Jesus is in control. There is great power available to us through Jesus.

Third, we must be willing to follow Jesus into suffering and into uncomfortable places. The world has been rescued through the suffering of Jesus, and we are called to follow him there.

Small Group Discussion Questions
Matthew 26:47-56

1. Everyone is going to fail Jesus in the events of his arrest, trials and crucifixion. The first was Judas, one of the twelve disciples. Have you ever been betrayed by someone close to you? Describe what that's like.
2. Matthew says that a great crowd, armed with swords and clubs, came to arrest Jesus. The church has always had powerful enemies against it, those, figuratively speaking, who come to us as a great crowd armed for battle. What are some of these enemies today?
3. The temptation of the church is to respond to these threats as this disciple did when he took out his sword. That is, we attempt to fight with earthly weapons. What are some forms of that you have observed?
4. Peter chopped off the ear of the chief priest's servant. It was mentioned in the sermon that perhaps Matthew intended this to have a figurative meaning as well as literal. That is, when the church resorts to force, it removes the ability of people to hear the gospel. The Crusades and Inquisition are both examples of that. Can you think of other examples?
5. When Jesus tells us to put down the sword, he is telling us to trust him instead of taking control ourselves. What ways do you seek to take control instead of trusting God?
6. The real power here lies with the word of Jesus and the Scriptures. Would it make any difference in your life if you really believed that?
7. The sermon ended with three applications. Which of these do you find most challenging?
 - 1) We must meet the challenges before us with courage and hope.
 - 2) We must change the narrative of fear and anger that is so prevalent in our world today.
 - 3) We must be willing to follow Jesus into suffering and into uncomfortable places.