

Sermon for Sunday, September 24, 1972 by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor
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"HOW TO KEEP FROM PAVING THE DEVIL'S ROAD"

St. Matthew 26:26-35

Text: "Peter declared to him, 'Though they all fall away because of you, I will never fall away'". St. Matthew 26:33

I dare say that there are few people who are deliberately evil or wicked. I venture to say that in spite of the many sins that all of us carry into life, rarely do we deliberately and intentionally set out to do the wrong thing. As a matter of fact, most of us have pretty good intentions about life. For example, when you joined the church your intentions were the best. You intended to make a new start, to be a better person, and to love Christ with all of your heart. Yet, it did not work out just that way. There came a day, quite unintentionally, when you lost your temper or when you said some ugly thing. Quite unexpectedly it slipped out unbidden and you had sinned against God and your fellow man. There came a day when you did something you had not intended to do. Suddenly--without warning--you lost control of some situation and although your intentions had been good, you sinned again. We discover that not only are we not as good as we can be, we are not even as good as we intend to be. Not a one of us goes to bed at night but that we must review a day in which we have seen our best intentions so often smashed and destroyed. Our loftiest aspirations, our highest ambitions, our fondest dreams of what we can and should be lie shattered at our feet. The ship of good intentions is flooded with the seas of failure, its bottom ripped out by some uncharted reef of disaster that unexpectedly blocked the course of life. As someone has so aptly put it, the road to hell is indeed paved with good intentions.

The disciples of Jesus had good intentions, too. One day Jesus stood talking to them. It was late in his ministry and his days were fast drawing to a close. He spoke to them of his coming death and how they would desert and deny him. The Bible puts it this way, "And then saith Jesus unto them, all ye shall be offended because of me this night; for it is written, I will smite the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock shall be scattered abroad." Surely the pride of the disciples was cut to the quick! They had been with Jesus from the beginning. They had stuck by him through persecution, rejection, and ridicule. Loyal they had stood by him through it all. Peter was stung to the heart. In denial he cries out, "Though all men shall be offended because of thee, yet will I never be offended." "Yes," said Peter, "I will stick with you to the very last. No matter what disaster comes, what calamity strikes, I will stand beside you to the bitter end. Though every man desert you, there will be one faithfully beside you at the last." This was Peter at his impetuous best--outspoken, brash, and full of good intentions. Yet, I would like to read for you another passage of scripture about this well-intended Peter. It is only a very few hours later when we turn the page and come to this, "Then he began to curse and to swear, saying, I know not the man. And immediately the cock crew."

Yes, Peter had good intentions. He never intended to deny Jesus. He never intended to curse and to swear and say he never knew him. As he squatted by the fire that cold and dreadful night his best intentions suddenly ran aground upon the shoal of fear. The words were wrenched from his lips, "Woman, I know not the man," and his good intentions lay shattered at his feet, watered by the tears of his failure.

And why do you suppose Peter failed? And why do you suppose it is that we share his failure? Peter never intended to fail Jesus, to let him down. Look for a moment at his good intentions. Notice first of all that he loved Jesus. From the very beginning he had loved him and he had left all in the light of that love to

follow his master. And Jesus knew that Peter loved him. Do you remember how John tells of Jesus' conversation with Peter after the resurrection? There on the beach one day Jesus appeared to his disciples and he said to Peter, "Peter, lovest thou me?" "Yea, Lord," came the reply, "Thou knowest that I love thee." This was no sudden, new-born love. No, it had its birth along dusty roads when they walked and talked together. It was a love born midst the multitudes as Jesus taught and blessed and healed. It was a love that came into being as he watched that gentle, loving face filled with compassion for the poor and the sick and the lame. It was a love born in agony as he watched the tears wrung from the eyes of Christ as he wept over a city that had denied him. Yes, Peter loved Jesus--loved him with all of his heart. So it was that he never intended to deny Jesus because he loved him.

And is not this basically true of us this morning? Do we not love Jesus, too? One of our hymns entitled, "My Jesus, I Love Thee," sums it up for us very well.

"I love thee, because Thou has first loved me,
And purchased my pardon on Calvary's tree,
I love Thee for wearing the thorns on Thy brow;
If ever I loved Thee, my Jesus, 'tis now."

Yes, we love him, too, for what he did for us on the cross and what he does for us from day to day. We like Peter never intend to betray Jesus and deny him with our sins, because basically we love him.

Then, note secondly that Peter had good intentions because his loyalty had been challenged. Ogden Nash writes jestingly,

"Why is it the children pour molasses on the cat's back
when the very thing we tell them not to do is pour molasses on the cat's
back."

Children--including us adult-type--are like that. Dare us to do a thing and we are bound and determined that we will do it. So Jesus had challenged the loyalty of Peter--"Ye shall be offended because of me this night." And Peter had responded, "Not I, Lord. Though all men be offended because of thee this night, yet will I never be offended."

And have not we felt this same stirring challenge? Jesus challenges us to live a better life, to put our hand to the plow and not look back, to take up our cross and follow him. He challenges us to the greatest adventure in human experience, to venture in faith into the realm of the spirit. He dares us to put our trust in him and to commit ourselves to his keeping. So, like Peter, we never intend to deny Jesus because our loyalty has been challenged.

Then, notice thirdly that Peter had good intentions because he was caught up in the enthusiasm of the moment. Those were great days--a time of testing, a time of adventure for all of human history stood at a turning point. It was this same Peter, caught up in the enthusiasm of the moment, who had cried out, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God." Peter knew that momentous events were transpiring, that eternal verities were breaking into history, that the Word of God had been made flesh and he was gripped in the hands of enthusiasm.

Are not our own good intentions hewn along these same lines? Are not our own good intentions cut from the same pattern? Our college students are starting off the fall semester enthusiastically full of good intentions. They intend to study, to make good grades, to do well. This church--with a new broom, so to speak, enthusiastically intends to sweep cleaner. Do not most of us start off new experiences this way? In the beginning we are full of zest and enthusiasm; we are captivated with zeal in what we are doing and all of our energies are concentrated on this effort. No, Peter never intended to deny Jesus; he never intended to curse

and swear and say he never knew him. He did not intend to because he was caught up in the enthusiasm of the moment.

Yes, Peter had the best intentions. He had good intentions because he truly loved Jesus, because his loyalty had been challenged, and because he was caught up in the enthusiasm of what God was doing in human history. Yet, in spite of these good intentions, we hear the sounds of the cock crowing and the sounds of a man weeping bitter tears--tears that fall up on the shattered fragments of his good intentions. The Bible says that Jesus turned and looked at Peter, the cock crew, and Peter went out and wept. He wept over the grave of good intentions.

I would like to suggest that Peter failed first of all because he underestimated the future. He did not imagine the future could hold anything so fearful as a crown of thorns; anything so terrible as a cut and bleeding back; anything so dreadful as the ominous threat of a cruel cross. He never dreamed that fear, like a black taste of bile in the mouth, could ravage his soul; he never dreamed that terror would lay its cold hand upon his heart; he never dreamed that the threat of pain and punishment and death could rip the courage from his breast and leave him trembling helplessly. His good intentions failed because he underestimated the future.

It is precisely here that we run into trouble. So often things do not turn out as we had hoped or expected. Life turns out to be far more serious and far more difficult than we had expected. The valleys turn out to be deeper and the shadows more dark and the way more hard than we had ever dreamed. Sickness, death and calamity; grief, pain and sorrow--all turn out to be far worse than we had expected. We discover that the devil is not dead, but he is still very real and very much at work in human lives. The shackles of temptation prove to be unbreakable and we find ourselves chained in the wreckage of our best intentions. We have failed because we never dreamed the future would be so bad; we have simply underestimated it.

Let me suggest secondly that Peter failed in his good intentions because he over-estimated himself. Notice the important pronoun in his little speech, "Yet will I never be offended." Peter was the spokesman of the disciples, he was their leader, his name meant "The Rock". Surely he would never fall. Yet, when the pay-off came, when the chips were down, when the dye was cast, that gallant determination turned into trembling denial, "Then began he to curse and swear, saying, 'I know not the man.'"

You may think you are strong and stout of heart; you may think that disaster and trouble will not make your faith falter and waver; your intentions to be true may be the very best, but do not over-estimate yourself. You see, there came a time when Peter needed a courage and a faith and a strength greater than his own to lean on. There came a time when Peter needed a resource of power greater than his own. He had thought he was self-sufficient, a world unto himself, only to discover himself bankrupt of strength and devoid of courage.

My friends, do not leave God out of your good intentions. There will come a time when your own strength fails, when your own courage snaps, when your own faith breaks and then you will need a courage and a strength greater than your own. There will come a time when the news is bad, when death enters the door, when pain and hurt come, and at a time like that, you will need a resource of power greater than your own. Don't shut God out by over-estimating yourself. There's a hymn we sing that goes,

"I need Thee, O I need Thee;
Every hour I need Thee."

No matter how good your intentions you are going to need God's power and God's strength, and God's courage.

Finally, notice that Peter failed because he was cut off from Jesus. As long as Jesus was there, it was easy to have faith in himself and in the future. With Jesus there he had no fear; he had even dared to walk on the water one stormy night to meet his master. But see what happens when he is cut off from Jesus: "Then began he to curse and to swear saying, 'I know not the man.'" Peter never realized how much he depended on the presence of Jesus for his faith and courage until Jesus was gone; he never realized how important it was to have Jesus beside him until the chips were down and Jesus was not there.

I do not know what the future holds of either you or me, but I know that without Jesus we cannot bear it. I do not know what strength or weakness of character you and I are carrying into life, but I know that without Jesus even the strongest shall fail. Jesus is calling you this morning. Midst the tumult of life, midst the storms that lie ahead, Jesus is calling you to follow him. And whoever you are his promise comes to you, "Lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world." I urge you to grasp with both hands the promise of his presence. You see, good intentions can never save you--only Jesus can do that.

No distant Lord have I,
Loving afar to be,
Made flesh for me he cannot rest
Until he rests in me.

O glorious Son of God,
Incarnate Deity,
I shall forever be with thee
Because thou art with me.