

Sermon on Luke 22:54-62
Peter's Denial Teaches Us
How to Deal with Temptation
Saint Mark's, Watertown, WI
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Scripture says: *Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation—and leaves no regret.* God: grant that that's what we remember this evening! Amen.

God's Word for our special consideration tonight is the rather familiar account of Peter denying Jesus three times. It's found in each of the Gospel accounts. Specifically tonight, I will be reading and explaining: Luke chapter twenty-two, verses fifty-four through sixty-two.

Introduction: Do We Really Fight Temptation?

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ—subject to relentless temptation:

How much do you really fight temptation? – That's a good question, isn't it? And I wonder what the answer is. Let's think about it this way....

On the one side, a non-Christian – somebody who lacks confidence in Christ – offers absolutely no resistance to temptation. Scripture says: *The sinful nature does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so.* See: Satan suggests a sin, and unless God's Law clubs an unbeliever into submission, that individual commits the sin. It's because a non-Christian has only a sinful nature, which is only capable of sinning.

On the other side, Jesus Christ perfectly resisted temptation. Satan constantly suggested sins to our Savior—the Bible says: *He was tempted in every way, just as we are, and yet was without sin.* I mean: whenever he was tempted not to obey his parents, Jesus recoiled from that and said, “No – yuck! – I would never think of failing to honor them.” Whenever Jesus was tempted to lust or tempted to mistreat somebody else, he recoiled from it, thinking, “No—certainly not!” And that's because Christ had only a new nature, which is only capable of doing good.

You and I, of course, are in between those two extremes. It's like the Apostle Paul said.... On the one hand: *I know that nothing good lives in me—that is, in my sinful nature.* On the other hand: *In my inner being – in my new nature – I delight in God's law.* All of us are somewhere between resisting temptation never and always.

That sets the parameters. None of us is a zero, never resisting temptation. And none of us is a ten, always resisting temptation. So, back to the original question: Where do you find yourself? How much do you really fight temptation?

Do you find yourself letting your thoughts and words linger on the grossest sinfulness—only managing to resist the very worst deeds? Or: do you find yourself living a life in which you consistently break one of God's commandments over and over again? Or: do you find yourself outwardly rather decent, but inwardly rather indecent? Or: do you rejoice to win many battles, but regret losing many others?

How much do you really fight temptation?

Well, my friend, wherever you are on that scale—I know you want to do a better job of fighting temptation. You love your Savior. You trust his words. You want to bring him glory by overcoming sin more and more. And you're concerned with sticking close to him.

Theme: Peter's Denial Teaches Us How to Deal with Temptation

And God's Word to us today is going to help you do all that. In today's section of Scripture: PETER'S DENIAL TEACHES US HOW TO DEAL WITH TEMPTATION—or more accurately, it's really Jesus who teaches us to overcome temptation here.

Part One: Peter Failed to Flee Temptation—as Do We

As God's Word to us today begins, it's the very first Maundy Thursday evening—some nearly two thousand years ago. Jesus has just allowed himself to be apprehended—over in the Garden of Gethsemane, on the slopes of the Mount of Olives, a half a mile across the Kidron Valley from Jerusalem's wall and the temple courts.

Then we read—and this is God's Word to us tonight: **Seizing Jesus, they led him away and took him into the house of the high priest.** It was probably several tenths of a mile into Jerusalem, and also not far from the temple courts. It was, no doubt, the house of Annas—the previous high priest of long-standing, the high priest emeritus. Jesus faced a preliminary interrogation before him, while messengers were gathering the seventy member Jewish ruling council for the main trial, the big show.

We read: **Peter followed at a distance**—loyal enough that he followed, scared enough that he didn't follow closely. Through a good word from the Apostle John, Peter gained access to the high priest's courtyard. You can imagine that Peter kept his distance. **But they had kindled a fire in the middle of the courtyard and had sat down together,** since early April evenings – even in semi-tropical regions – can get really chilly. And: **Peter sat down with them.** He was, no doubt, also cold. More importantly: he would have been suspicious, had he merely lurked in the shadows.

Unfortunately (or finally: fortunately, depending on your perspective): **A servant girl saw him seated there in the firelight.** She had apparently been with everybody in the garden. Her job was to tend the door. **She looked closely at Peter and said, "This man was with him."** Peter's reaction? **He denied it. "Woman, I don't know him," he said.** And Peter used a Greek word that says: “Not only is he not a friend of mine, but I never even really met the man.” It was denial number one....

A little later someone else saw him and said, "You also are one of them." Actually, this time Peter faced two accusers—because the other accounts tell us the original girl joined this accusation also. Peter's reaction? **"Man, I am not!" Peter replied.** It was denial number two.

Finally: **About an hour later another asserted, "Certainly this fellow was with him, for he is a Galilean."** Here it's another guy. Other accounts make it clear that he is joined by several others. In fact, one of those several others was even a relative of Malchus, upon whom this Peter had perpetrated a capital crime—severe bodily injury and attempted murder. **Peter replied, "Man, I don't know what you're talking about!"** Other accounts add that Peter even cursed and swore. And that's denial number three.

Wow! What had gone wrong? I mean: Here's Peter—leader among the apostles, the first boldly to declare: *You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God*, the one who was (honestly) so sure he would never disown Jesus. And he denies him—emphatically, three times, even cursing and swearing. What had gone wrong? Well, let's trace it all the way back to the beginning, and let's apply it – every step of the way – to ourselves....

First: Peter was born sinful, Peter remained sinful, and Peter would stay sinful until his dying day. ...And so will we! We may as well face it right away: We were born sinners, we'll always be sinners (this side of glory), and we are going to die as sinners.

Second, Peter failed to listen to God's Word. Jesus – God himself! – had warned him: *Today, before the rooster crows two times, you will deny three times that you know me.* Peter just didn't believe it. ...And that's where we fall, too! Our dear Lord says: *Flee temptation.* But we flirt with it. “A little lust won't hurt us;” “a little gossip won't

hurt us;” “a little rebellion won’t hurt us;” we think. And then lust gives birth to adultery, and gossip gives birth to slander, and rebellion gives birth to crime—and we get what we deserve.

Third: Peter was proud. *Even if all the others leave you, I never will*, he said. ...And we say the same. “I know better than to fall into adultery;” “I know better than to slander anyone;” “I’m no criminal;” we say—until all of a sudden, we are.

Fourth: Peter failed to pray, even when Jesus pleaded with him: *Peter, watch and pray, so that you will not also fall into temptation*. But Peter slept. ...And so do we. Or we watch t.v. Or we fiddle around with something else. Or we work ourselves silly. But we don’t pray. No wonder we fall into temptation!

Fifth: Peter swung entirely to the other side. At first: rather than denying Jesus, he led the attack on his behalf. He went for the kill against Malchus. ...Sometimes, so do we! We’ll say: “Fine, Lord: not only won’t I lust, I won’t have any feelings.” “Lord, not only won’t I gossip, I won’t even speak.” Lord, not only won’t I rebel, I won’t make a peep.” But that’s answering sin with sin—and that doesn’t work either, does it?

And then, finally: Peter walks right smack dab into temptation—right into the courtyard, right up to the fire, right into the crowd. And he’s a sitting duck for Satan, who has his way with him. ...And so are we! Sometimes, rather than fleeing temptation, we walk right smack into the middle of it.

So, guys: Flee temptation! Throw out the Sports Illustrated Swim Suit Edition as soon as it comes in the mail! (Hey: that’s what I’ve got to do!) Cancel the movie channels on cable! (That’s what I’ve had to do!) Get a filter for your internet access! (That’s what we’ve got here at church!) And guys: enlist your wife’s help! And if you don’t have a wife, well, you know: you may just need a wife!

Gals: you flee temptation, too! If you use your e-mail to say mean things to others, cancel your account. If you always meet your friend at ten o’clock break for the latest gossip, take your break earlier or later.

Kids: you flee temptation, too! If you’ve got friends that always seem to lead you into temptation—well, they’re not really friends anymore. Avoid them!

Part Two: Jesus Called Peter to Repentance—as He Does for Us

...So, are you feeling guilty now? I surely am. How can we fail to feel guilty? No matter how much I flee temptation, or pray, or listen to the Word—I’m still a guilty sinner. I was born guilty. I live guilty. And I will die guilty.

Well, Peter knew that feeling. It says: **Just as he was speaking** – disowning his own Savior a third time – **the rooster crowed**. It wasn’t accidental. God made that rooster squawk. Furthermore: Jesus appeared. He was probably being led through the courtyard on his way from Annas’ house to Caiaphas’ house: where the Sanhedrin had now gathered, where the main part of his trial would take place. And it says: **The Lord turned and looked straight at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word the Lord had spoken to him: "Before the rooster crows today, you will disown me three times." And he went outside and wept bitterly.**

See Jesus had loved Peter, and he still loved Peter. When Peter denied him and the rooster crowed, you’d expect Jesus to have turned away from Peter, looked at the ground, and shaken his head. Instead, Jesus looked straight at Peter—he didn’t disown him; he still cared.

And Jesus reacts the same way to you. Through his Word, Jesus is looking at you right now – at this very moment – and he’s saying to you: “I still love you. I still care about you. And I always will.” He says, “Do you see these chains around my hands? Your sins have bound my hands like this and are leading me to death! But it’s okay, my

brother, my sister, I have loved you forever, and I want to die for you. Do you see this bruise on my face and this blood from my mouth—the injuries I got when that temple guard slapped me? This is the beginning of punishment for your trespasses! But it's okay, my brother, my sister, I will love you forever, and I want to suffer for you.”

So, my friend: Your adultery? It's gone! Your slander? It's gone! Your crime? It's gone! Your salvation? It's won! Your heaven? It's won! Your eternal life? It's guaranteed! Count on it: in Christ!!!

Conclusion: We Really Fight Temptation!

So, my brothers and sisters, does it appear to you that this message has the power to help you in your struggle against temptation? I think so! Jesus buried your lust in his tomb. Jesus buried your gossip in his grave. Your rebellion is dead and gone. And he assures you, “I can help you overcome them—until at last I enable you to overcome them completely in heavenly glory.” Won't that be wonderful? Amen!

Scripture says: *If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.* God: grant that that's what we remember this evening! Amen.