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### Sermon Summary #47

#### The Look

**Mark 14:26-31, 66-72; Mark 16:1-8; Luke 22:61-62**

Is forgiveness possible? It may sound like a silly question, especially to a Christian audience that I assume knows what the Bible says about God's grace and redemption and the forgiveness of sin through faith in Christ. But even for Christians, sometimes "forgiveness" is only a word lost in a stack of abstract theological language that we speak and confess and recite and even affirm in the liturgy.

But if you're anything like me, all that doesn't matter if I can't receive forgiveness into the depths of my soul and experience its liberating, life-changing power and taste its sweetness.

So, let me ask the question again: Is forgiveness possible? Can a thief be forgiven? What about an adulterer? What about a woman who's had an abortion, or a man who's paid for one? What about those failures, those sins, committed long ago, forgotten by everyone else but still lingering in our spiritual memory, sins whose guilt and shame we carry around tucked away safely in our hearts?

Is forgiveness possible?

Why is it so important for us to answer that question? Simply because **the only sin that can be defeated is a sin that has been forgiven**. There are countless natural ways to overcome bad habits and repeated failures: therapies, formulas, will-power, etc. But they all produce only self-righteousness, not the righteousness of God.

**Being right with God must precede doing right for God.** That's why our question is so crucial. Let me answer the question by telling you a story, one with which you're probably quite familiar.

All of us have been in situations when we were desperate for a friend, just one person to stand with us to face the hard things in life. Jesus was no exception. If ever Jesus needed a friend, this was the time. Earlier in his ministry, Jesus had often wanted to be alone. He would quietly slip away while the others were sleeping, hungry for solitude, for that rare moment alone with the Father, away from the pressure of the crowds and the endless questioning of the Pharisees. The last thing he wanted was someone to interrupt and hang around.

But that was then. This is now. The night of his betrayal. "This very night," said Jesus, "you will all fall away" on account of me (Mk. 14:30). Not just any night, but "**this** very night," the night Jesus and the disciples sat together in the upper room and enjoyed a depth of personal and spiritual intimacy perhaps unlike anything they had known before. "**This** very night," said Jesus, "the night we ate together, prayed together, sang together . . . Notwithstanding this remarkable fellowship and love and joy we've shared, notwithstanding the depths of affection you feel for me now, in only a few short hours you will all abandon me."

"You will be offended by me," Jesus told them. "Your faith will turn to fear. At first sight of the enemy you will all turn tail and scamper away into the shadows like so many frightened pups. For it is written, 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered'" (Mk. 14:27).

"Not me, Lord! No way!" Peter's protest was loud and arrogant. "Maybe John will abandon you. I mean, anyone so loving and tender has to be a little soft, a bit weak, especially when the chips are down. But not me! Not good old Peter! Hey, don't forget, Lord, I'm the Rock. You said so yourself. Remember?"

"Peter, let me tell you something," Jesus replied. "Truly I tell you, this very night before the rooster crows twice, you will deny me three times" (14:30).

But once again, Peter boldly begged to differ with Jesus. We can only imagine what more he might have said, or at least thought, in reaction to the dire prediction about him. Perhaps something like this: “I hear you Lord. And I don’t mean to sound argumentative. But I’ll never disown you. I’ll die first! I can’t speak for the others. Some of them aren’t as strong as I am. They didn’t walk on water like me. Sure, I know you selected each of them, Lord, but don’t forget that Matthew there was a tax-collector. It wouldn’t surprise me to see him revert to his former ways. After all, greed and materialism aren’t easily uprooted from the human heart. And I grew up with Andrew. If you only knew how often he’s messed up. But not me, Lord. You can always count on ol’ Peter!”

Instead of falling on his face and humbly pleading for gracious enablement to withstand the coming test, Peter implicitly accused Jesus of lying. But he wasn’t alone in this, for “they all said the same” (14:31). We don’t know what motivated them to chime in with Peter’s protest. Perhaps they were sincere, or maybe they just didn’t want to be outdone by Peter’s declaration of love and loyalty.

In any case, Jesus was right and they were wrong. That doesn’t surprise you, does it? Following his arrest in Gethsemane, “they all left him and fled” (14:50).

But wait a minute. *Maybe Peter really meant what he said.* We are told that Peter “followed him at a distance, right into the courtyard of the high priest. He was sitting with the guards and warming himself at the fire” (14:54).

What could Peter possibly have been thinking? Had he forgotten Jesus’ prediction? It had only been a few hours before. Was it already a fading memory? Or was he still puffed up with confidence in his own power to resist, determined to prove his Lord wrong?

The kangaroo court convened. Trumped-up charges. Lying witnesses. Accusations of blasphemy. And then the consummate indignity: They spit in his face and struck him with their fists. Others slapped him and said, “Prophesy to us. Who hit you?” (14:65).

And where was Peter when Jesus needed him most? He was sitting out in the courtyard, “and one of the servant girls of the high priest came, and seeing Peter warming himself, she looked at him and said, ‘You also were with the Nazarene, Jesus’” (Mk. 14:66-67).

“Finally,” Peter said to himself, “I’ve been waiting here patiently hoping someone would eventually recognize me and ask that question. Now I’ve got the opportunity to prove my point and demonstrate to everyone what I’m made of. At last, the chance to show how deep my loyalty runs and what kind of man I really am.” Well, not quite.

“But he denied it, saying, ‘I neither know nor understand what you mean’” (14:68). It was a standoff: Peter, the Rock, the strong-armed, grizzled fisherman, face-to-face with . . . with . . . a “servant girl”? Surely not! Had Peter been confronted by Pontius Pilate and threatened with immediate execution, perhaps we might understand (though by no means excuse) his failure. If it were Caiaphas, the high priest, or Annas, or a Roman soldier with a sword pressed perilously close to his throat, . . . but a “servant girl”? John Calvin was right:

“Here we see that it does not take a heavy fight to break a man, nor many forces and devices. Whoever is not dependent on God’s hand will soon fall, at a breath of wind or the noise of a falling leaf. Peter certainly was no less brave than any of us, and had already given no ordinary proof of his high courage (though his boldness was excessive). Yet he does not wait to be brought to the tribunal of the Pontiff, or until the enemy threatens his violent death, but, at the voice of a young woman, he is scared, and straight out denies his Master” (*A Harmony of the Gospels: Matthew, Mark and Luke*, trans. A. W. Morrison [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972], vol. 3, p. 170).

Frustrated and fearful, Peter sought an avenue of escape. He went out to the gateway but was again confronted, this time by . . . you guessed it, “the servant girl” (Mk. 14:69)! She said to the bystanders, “This man is one of them” (14:69). But again “Peter denied it” (14:70).

Then they challenged him yet a third time, shouting out, “Certainly you are one of them, for you are a Galilean” (14:70). “But he began to invoke a curse on himself and to swear, ‘I do not know this man of whom you speak’” (14:71). Peter not only invoked a solemn curse on himself should he be lying, but according to Matthew’s gospel he also called down a curse upon his accusers should they persist in bringing such charges against him.

Peter didn’t use profanity, as some have thought. His oath was in all likelihood an appeal to something sacred – used to reinforce the truth of his denial. Perhaps he said, “By all that is holy, I swear I don’t know the man!” Or, “With God as my witness, this man is a stranger to me!” Or, “I appeal to the sacred city Jerusalem that I am telling you the truth about him!”

Adding insult to injury, he even refused to use the name of Jesus. He contemptuously and disdainfully refers to him as “this man.” How far he had fallen from that monumental confession: “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God” (Mt. 16:16).

Let’s be clear about one thing. My detailed portrayal of Peter’s sin is not designed to hold him up for public ridicule. I understand all too well Peter’s weakness. Don’t we all? Why, then, have I gone to such lengths to describe his self-protective cowardice? I did it to convince you beyond any shadow of doubt that forgiveness is possible! To demonstrate to you that there is hope! Let me do it by pointing you to **two remarkable statements**.

All four writers record the crowing of the rooster. Luke, the beloved physician, alone tells us that at the precise moment of Peter’s third denial, just as the rooster crowed, “**the Lord turned and looked straight at Peter**” (Luke 22:61). Pause for a moment and consider the majesty of divine providence. Consider how the Father orchestrated this moment with such precision and beauty. There must have been dozens of people everywhere, running back and forth, caught up in the frenzy of the events of that night. Yet Jesus saw only Peter, and Peter saw only Jesus. Jesus is being shuttled back and forth, dragged through courtyards, in and out of rooms. Peter’s loud cursing still echoed in the courtyard of Caiaphas, yet at precisely the moment the rooster crowed, Jesus turned and locked eyes with Peter!

“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” (Mark 14:72).

When Jesus turned and looked at Peter, he saw an angry and defiant man, a man whose adamant declarations of undying allegiance had withered at the sound of a servant girl’s voice. But what did Peter see when he looked at Jesus? Into what kind of eyes did he gaze? On what kind of face did he look? Was it the face of a well-groomed yuppie? Was it the face of a freshly washed, neatly manicured businessman? Was it the face of a nicely shaved, nattily attired politician? Hardly.

I’ll tell you what Peter saw. He looked into blackened eyes, virtually closed from the savage beating Jesus had endured. Bruised cheeks, swollen jaw, bloodied nose, with the vile and venomous spittle of his taunters dripping from his beard.

Peter looked with horror at the face of Jesus, barely recognizable. With what did Jesus look back at Peter? There are all sorts of “looks”. Our eyes alone can communicate virtually every human emotion.

There is the flirtatious look that passes between two teens in the hallway at school. There is the intimidating stare of two boxers in the middle of the ring. There are the “looks that kill,” the looks that pass between two people after one has abandoned and betrayed the other.

There is the “I-told-you-so” look, that unmistakable facial contortion reminding one of past failures and broken promises. It is a condescending glare, a look of smug superiority.

The look of anger is one we all know well. No words are necessary, only a disdainful sneer that says, “Some friend you turned out to be! Where were you when I needed you most?”

We’ve all been on the receiving (and sending) end of the look of resentment. I’m talking about one of those “after-all-I’ve-done-for-you-this-is-what-I-get-in-return” looks.

Perhaps the most painful look of all is the one of disappointment. Combined with a sad shaking of the head it says, “You sorry, no-good bum. I should have expected something like this from someone like you.”

But how did Jesus look at Peter? (Perhaps at this point each of us needs to ask ourselves: How does Jesus look at me when I fail him, deny him, turn my back on him?)

Was it with disdain or disappointment or anger or resentment? I don’t think so. I wasn’t there. I can only speculate. Neither Matthew nor Mark nor Luke nor John tells us. But knowing Jesus as I do, and seeing Peter’s response, I think I have a pretty good idea.

I think Jesus turned toward Peter with a look that he recognized immediately, a look of incredible power, enough to bring down the stone barriers of a military fortress. In this case it pierced the sinful walls of Peter’s stricken heart. It was the same look Peter had seen so many times before: Zaccheus, the woman at the well, the woman taken in adultery, so many lepers and prostitutes and tax-collectors had been the focus of those penetrating eyes of love and hope and forgiveness. And then Peter remembered, and he went outside and wept bitterly.

So what did Peter see in those bruised and bloodied eyes? There were no words uttered, but the eyes of Jesus spoke loudly and clearly: **“It’s OK Peter. I know your heart. I know that deep down inside you really do love me. I know the brokenness and devastation you feel right now. It really is OK. I still love you as much now as I ever did before. It’s OK.”** It was more than Peter could believe. After what he’d done, knowing what he deserved, the eyes of Jesus said, “There’s still hope.”

I said earlier that there were two statements that confirm for us the possibility of forgiveness and hope and restoration. We’ve seen the first in that remarkable look of love. What is the second?

Again, I’m only speculating, but I don’t think this look of loving forgiveness was in itself enough to get Peter “over the hump” and “back in the game,” so to speak. It helped. Peter’s broken heart was led to life-giving repentance. But something more needed to occur. Peter was probably still filled with self-doubt and anxiety, feeling disqualified as an apostle. I can almost hear him say: “Even if I’m forgiven, I can’t believe Jesus would ever want to see me again. Even if he did, I’m probably forever disqualified from ministry. Better for everyone that I just slip away into the shadows.”

But Jesus wasn’t yet done with Peter. We read in **Mark 16:1-8** of the events on Sunday, after the Sabbath. Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome “brought spices so that they might go and anoint” Jesus’ body. When they arrive at the tomb, they are stunned to see the stone rolled away and an angel dressed in a white robe. His words to them:

“Do not be alarmed. You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen; he is not here. See the place where they laid him. But go, tell his disciples **and Peter** that he is going before you to Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you” (Mark 16:6-7; emphasis mine).

I can imagine that the risen Christ gave explicit instructions to that angel! “Now listen carefully. When you tell

the women to report back to the disciples that I'll meet them in Galilee, be absolutely certain you mention Peter by name. Single him out. Make a point of him so those women will know without a doubt that he is included."

I wish I had been present to see the women rush into the room where the disciples had gathered. Out of breath, overcome by joy and indescribable excitement, they speak the words that none of the disciples ever expected to hear: "He has risen! The angel said to go to Galilee and Jesus would meet all of you there." At this point, I can almost imagine Peter, sitting in the corner, hiding in the shadows, hoping no one will notice his presence, saying to himself: "Well, that's great. He's alive. But there's no way I'm going to Galilee. I can't bear the thought of looking into his face again. Worse still, he probably can't bear the thought of looking at me."

"Oh, yeah. Peter," shouted Mary and Salome, "he mentioned you specifically. I'm not sure why, but that angel made a point of using your name. He singled you out. You're included. You're supposed to come too. Jesus wants to see you."

Unless I miss my guess, that was when "forgiveness" became more than just a word for Peter! The reality of restoration and hope and cleansing and a fresh start came flooding into his soul, wave upon wave of joy and gratitude and delight.

Do you fear you've sinned beyond the reach of divine grace? Is your heart haunted with the thought that your repeated failures have taken you past the point of no return? Do you live in fear that forgiveness is nothing but a theological term for others to enjoy?

I believe the Lord Jesus would look into your eyes today, no less than he did into Peter's so many centuries ago. Were you, by his grace, to open the eyes of your heart, broken and repentant, and gaze into his face, I believe you'd see what Peter saw: "It's OK. I love you. I forgive you."