



May 11: Rising from Denial (Peter) | John 21:15-19

I think you know I get together with other pastors each week via zoom. We've been meeting for years now. Our trust level is very high, we share honestly about our struggles in ministry. As pastors, we instantly get each other and the unique challenges of the job.

Last January or so, can't remember exactly when or what exactly and it doesn't even matter really, but someone shared an area in their ministry that was weighing heavily on them. He told us about a mistake he felt he had made and it was really weighing him down.

And then, just recently, right before we were going to sign off our zoom call, he made a quick off-handed reference to that mistake again and his regret. Just a quick comment.

And then my wise pastor friend asked this gentle but pointed question, "Kevin, when are you going to forgive yourself for that mistake?"

The compassion and empathy in her voice, even as she asked that grace-filled question, stopped us all in our tracks. He paused, chuckled wryly and replied with something like, "Well, yeah, I guess when I am good and ready."

I've been thinking about her question and how I might have responded.

And there's no denying it, forgiving ourselves is probably one of the hardest things we need to do. It's hard and can take a long time. We can even forget we need to forgive ourselves.

And we know that when we struggle to forgive ourselves, the heavy cumbersome weight of that unforgiveness – though mostly internal and invisible – can hinder us from experiencing relationships and block us from the life and freedom Christ desires for us.

But like we learned last week, as we started our new sermon series and dug into Thomas' story, it is only through a grace-filled encounter with Jesus, that we can hope to RISE STRONG into this new life Jesus longs to lead us into.

Last week, it was rising from skepticism into deeper faith. This week it is rising strong from denial into forgiveness.

As we desire to rise strong in no longer denying, but receiving Christ's forgiveness, specifically forgiving ourselves...all to become a better reflection of the Lord's forgiving love for all.

In a moment we are going to watch a short clip from a powerful movie, *The Mission* from 1986, based on a true story.

You will see a very young Robert De Niro who plays...Rodrigo Mendoza, a mercenary and slave trader in the 1750's, who killed his brother in a fit of rage.

Overcome with guilt, you'll see the real physical heavy cumbersome burden Mendoza takes on as penance (meaning what he took on as self-punishment for his wrongdoing.)

As Mendoza then joins Jesuit missionaries, undertaking a grueling journey into the deep jungles of Paraguay. A powerful example of what it can look like when you cannot forgive yourself. Let's watch.

Can you imagine hauling that heavy awkward bundle ten feet let alone through the jungle? Who knew guilt and unforgiveness could weigh so much. Here's the next clip.

Here we saw a very young Liam Neeson ask, "Father, how long must he carry that stupid thing?" They had watched him carry that weight of guilt and unforgiveness for days, maybe weeks. Rodrigo wasn't ready.

How long do we have to carry our burdens of guilt?

And then that poignant scene, Liam tries to cut off Rodrigo's guilt. The Jesuit priests were ready to forgive him, to say his penance was completed.

But Rodrigo refuses to have his penance shortened. Climbs down, retrieves it and reties it to himself. That searing look he gave Liam.

No one can make us forgive ourselves. It's work only we can do, as we allow God's grace to soften our hearts.

It can take a long time to forgive ourselves. Maybe you know what it is like to spend time, years even, under a heavy load of regret and self-condemnation?

Unforgiveness can feel like you have swallowed shards of glass, or swallowed acid...eating and tearing yourself up inside. And you do it, you hold on to it, you re-tie it to yourself because maybe you think you deserve it.

But is that the best we can do? To carry heavy heavy burdens of self-unforgiveness around until we are ready to forgive ourselves?

Is this really God's heart for us?

First as we turn to the gospel of John and this story, I am surprised that it has taken me this long in life of reading and re-reading that passage before I could see it. This passage is all about forgiveness.

Jesus forgave Peter immediately and called him back into service.

Such hope for us if we are ready to take it in.

Next, we need to put John 21 in context, we need to review the big mistake Peter made. Earlier in John 18, on the night of Jesus' arrest, you may remember Peter and John follow Jesus as he is violently hauled before the High Priest.

As Peter watches the proceedings, a servant girl immediately asks Peter if he is one of Jesus' disciples. But he denies it and warms himself by a fire with others.

As he stands by the fire, he is asked two more times whether he is one of Jesus' disciples because his Galilean accent is giving him away. Two more times he vehemently denies knowing Jesus.

Immediately after the third denial, a rooster crows—fulfilling Jesus' earlier prediction in John chapter 13 that Peter would deny Him three times before the rooster crowed.

Full of shame and guilt over his denial of Jesus, Peter stumbled outside and wept bitterly.

Fast forward, after Jesus' resurrection, we come to John chapter 21. Jesus meets them early one morning on the shores of Lake Galilee.

That morning by the lake, Jesus provides another abundant fishing expedition, bakes some fish for breakfast, and invites the guys to join him. It is after that breakfast Jesus and Peter have this conversation.

And now we can see, it makes more sense now, when Jesus turns to Peter and asks three times, “Do you love me?”— because it mirrors Peter’s three earlier denials.

Each time Peter answers “Yes, Lord,” and Jesus responds with a command to “Feed my sheep.”

This loving reconciliation initiated by Jesus, restores Peter and commissions him to care for Jesus’ followers, reconfirming his status as a disciple.

And that Jesus is still calling Peter to do important work as a leader of the disciples and founder of the early church.

Many of us may know this story, but have you ever stopped to notice, how quickly Jesus acted to extend forgiveness? How Jesus saves Peter from a long battle with regret and recrimination?

Peter’s imperfect love for Jesus does not seem to change Jesus’ unchanging love of Peter. The full and complete forgiveness Jesus gives Peter is evident in his willingness to initiate, feed, and address Peter as friend, even after Peter’s denial.

In John chapter 20, Jesus says that if you forgive someone else’s sin, they are forgiven through the Holy Spirit. Our forgiveness of others and ourselves allows the power of God to move, change, and reconcile us and others.

Forgiveness allows us to journey from the moments where we deny Jesus, or make other big, relationship-harming mistakes to restoring of broken relationships and renewed faithfulness with God and others.

Just the way my brain works, but I kind of think of forgiveness as the solution to a problem, and ending. But this passage shows how forgiveness from Jesus is much more like a first step, a starting point. It launches Peter.

Jesus’ forgiveness builds a richer inner foundation in Peter, that frees Peter. Peter rose strong in newness of life found in Christ and lived out his key leadership role in the early church.

We might think, like Peter did, that Peter’s denial of Jesus’ would define and label him. Just like it did Thomas as Doubting Thomas.

Why not Reeking Lazarus or now Denying Peter? But it never did. Because Jesus quickly extended grace to Peter.

How often do we let our mistakes define us? Or how often does our inability to forgive ourselves derail us from living the lives we were made for?

How might this example of Peter, who quickly accepted the full power of Jesus' forgiveness, move us toward quicker self-forgiveness and the following God's call on our lives?

Speaking of self-forgiveness, let's watch how Rodrigo's story resolves.

After he climbs the steep and treacherous mountains to the Guarani village, dragging that heavy armor that externally symbolized his past sin, guilt and violence...finally, we see he was able to forgive himself.

I believe he was able to move into forgiving himself partly through the forgiveness of his Jesuit companions and the forgiveness of the Guarani Indians. But he finally forgives himself and allows his heavy burden to be cut off him and dropped into the raging river below.

His tears, his weeping signal a significant turning point for Rodrigo. He was able to let go of guilt and of his past, a life-changing moment of self-forgiveness.

A powerful visual of his inner spiritual growth, reconciling with himself and with God. Being reconciled to others as they come around him, hugging him, celebrating him.

It is easily one of the most potent scenes I have ever seen on film. Still remember it 39 years later.

How are you doing with self-forgiveness? Are you still carrying unforgiveness around like a heavy burden? When will you forgive yourself?

It seems fitting to close in praying for all of us...instead of Time of Reflection.

Lord Jesus, like Peter, I have denied You in fear. But You asked Peter, "Do you love Me?"—not to shame, but to restore. In our failures, remind us today and right now, remind us that your lavish grace and unfailing love reaches deeper than any regret or guilt we carry.

So, Holy Spirit, help me, help us fully forgive ourselves. Help us shed any heavy burdens of guilt we may feel. Cut them off us, Lord. Help us leave church today

walking in self- forgiveness and freedom, with a lighter step, ready to forgive others in Your name.

And, thank you for never giving up on us or letting us go. Amen.