

2 Thessalonians|Psalms|Matthew 2|41|27:9|9|3-2|41|27:12|9|5

OPEN: A tourist was visiting a famous landmark on the ocean and he'd walked out on a pier to see the ocean better. But as he looked over the edge of the pier he was disturbed by how deep the water seemed to be. As he was thinking about how deep the water must be at this point, he noticed an old man fishing off the pier, and he went over to him and asked: "If I were to fall into this water, would I drown?" The old man smiled and said "Nah. Falling into the water isn't what drowns people. It's staying UNDER the water that drowns them."

The title for our sermon this morning is "Can You Fall So Far Down You Can't Get Up?" In other words: "Can you mess up your life so badly that you can't undo the damage?"

And the answer from Scripture is... YES. You can mess things up so badly you can't undo the damage.

(pause)

And the answer from Scripture is... NO. You can't mess things up so badly you can't undo the damage.

Sound confusing?

The Bible teaches us that you CAN drown in your sin. But it isn't the falling into sin that will drown you... it's the staying under that will do that!

Let's start with what II Thessalonians 2:10-12 tells us about this. It says that certain people perish "... because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. Therefore God sends them a strong delusion, so that they may believe what is false, in order that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness."

There are certain people who are going to perish because they've made a decision they've decided to REFUSE to love the truth. These people really don't want God to tell them what to do. They don't want God to have any real authority in their lives. THEY want to be the final authority in their lives.

This (holding up the Bible) is God's written truth. If I disagree with God's written Word, then I have rejected truth and I have embraced a lie. If I do that, God says He will send me "...a strong delusion, so that (I) may believe what is false, in order that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness." II Thessalonians 2:11-12

That's scary. And that's disturbing. And somehow it doesn't seem quite fair. But it IS fair.

God is an equal opportunity employer. If people WANT the truth God will give them the truth. But if they DON'T want the truth - if they refuse to love the Truth - God will give them what they want. They want falsehood? - God will give them falsehood. God will give them a LIE to deceive them so that in the final day - when we stand before His throne - there will

be no gray area. You'll either belong to God or you won't. And the decision will already have been made, by YOU AND I, as to our final destination.

We actually have an illustration out of Scripture of a man who made that choice in his life. He was a man who made the choice to embrace falsehood and lies in his life.

His name was Judas Iscariot.

His name has been a byword for betrayal. His name was immortalized by the kiss he used to betray Christ. We call it the "Judas Kiss" – it speaks of treachery and deceit.

Now, there are theologians who try to cut Judas a break. They try to paint Judas as a nice guy who was just "misunderstood".

ILLUS: Years ago, there was a popular musical entitled "Jesus Christ Superstar" and it depicted Judas as actually a hero who was trying to save Jesus from His self-destructive ways. According to their story Judas meant well, but he ended up getting Jesus killed anyway. In their story - Judas was a hero, he was a nice man who just didn't understand what God had in mind.

But Judas was NOT a hero. And he was NOT a nice man.
Judas was not a man you could trust.

And John 12:3-6 tells us why.

"Mary took about a pint of pure nard, an expensive perfume; she poured it on Jesus' feet and wiped his feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. But one of his disciples, JUDAS ISCARIOT, who was later to betray him, objected, 'Why wasn't this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year's wages.' He did not say this because he cared about the poor but because HE WAS A THIEF; as keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it."

Judas was a thief... and a liar. He followed Jesus for the power and money he could get. He hung around Jesus because Jesus was a rising and influential Rabbi who might even have political possibilities. Judas was a manipulative, selfish man... and was not nice.

But now wait a minute?

Didn't Jesus chose Judas to be one His closest disciples? (YES)

Didn't Jesus spend ALL night praying before he selected these 12 special men? (YES)

So, do you think that Jesus knew that Judas was going to steal from Him?

Yeah, Jesus knew that!

(PAUSE) So... why did He pick Judas?

The explanation is found in John 17:12 where Jesus prayed: "While I was with (the 12 disciples) in the world, I kept them in Your name. Those whom You gave Me I have kept; and none of them is lost except the son of perdition, that the Scripture might be fulfilled."

Who was this "son of perdition"? (Judas)

He was chosen so that "Scripture might be fulfilled."

You see Judas was chosen by God because of the kind of man he was.

Judas was a thief.

He was a thief BEFORE he even betrayed Christ.

He was the kind of man who embezzles from companies because he enjoys it. He wasn't borrowing money to keep himself afloat... he was stealing for the pure thrill of doing it.

Jesus chose Judas to fulfill prophecy.

He chose him because of the kind of man he was.

Judas was a nasty man. A self-centered and self-serving man.

Judas was the kind of guy who would steal EVEN from his friends.

He was a man who would steal EVEN from Jesus.

Judas was chosen because he had no conscience.

Because he had no scruples.

He was chosen because he was a bad guy.

Judas was the classic example of a man who "...refused to love the truth..."

He'd already decided didn't want God's truth in his life.

He'd already decided he didn't want God in control of his life.

He'd already decided his destiny... he was going to go to hell.

And since Judas had made that decision God decided to use him for His purposes.

Since Judas had already made the decision that would send him to hell. God chose him to fulfill a prophecy from the Old Testament. A prophecy that said that SOMEONE was going to betray the Messiah. Psalm 41:9 declared:

"Even my close friend in whom I trusted, who ate my bread, has lifted his heel against me."

So let's review: Judas was a bad man. He was a thief and a liar. He was going to hell... and God made use of him to fulfill a prophecy of betrayal. He's the perfect example of a man who fell into sin and stayed there. And he drowned in his sin.

(Pause)

It was about at this point in my sermon preparation that I got stuck.

It happens to me sometimes.

I'll be making good progress on a message and, all of a sudden, it's like I've run into a wall and I can't seem to get over or around it. I just get stuck. When that happens I put the sermon to one side and do something else. If it's late at night I just go to bed and get some sleep and get a fresh start on the sermon later.

Like I said, this is where I got stuck.

Something was bothering me about the sermon and I didn't know what it was.

But when I'd had a good night's sleep and started back working on the message, I realized what the problem was...

Have you ever heard someone say: "The preacher seemed to be preaching right at me today?"

That's what was bothering me.

I could picture people in this congregation worrying that I might be preaching at them.

Worried that I thought of them as being like Judas.

And it's usually the folks who think such things that are the most gentle and humble people around.

So let me clarify something right now.

I can't think of anybody in this congregation that reminds me of Judas.

You might be fooling me, but there isn't anyone here who I would think of being anything like Judas.

But I HAVE met church goers who have reminded me of Judas.

In fact, over my lifetime, I've met preachers who've reminded me of Judas.

I've met Elders and Sunday School teachers, and Deacons, and all sorts of people in all kinds of roles in the church in the past who are very much like Judas.

You see... Judas was a VERY religious man.

He was "in church" all the time.

He'd heard every sermon Jesus ever preached.

He'd watched every miracle Jesus ever performed.

In fact, Judas was honored to be part of the 70 men who were sent out to preach about the coming of the Kingdom of God. He'd preached, And he'd done miracles. He'd been one of the leading forces in Jesus' army of evangelists who spread God's Word of the coming Kingdom.

And Judas was a leader in the group. He was part of the inner circle. He was a trusted man and a respected man. In fact, he was so trusted and respected by the other disciples that they gave him the purse that held their "church finances." You only give that responsibility to people you feel you can rely on.

Judas was a VERY religious man.

But Judas had a problem. And his problem WAS NOT that he wasn't in church!

Judas' problem he loved being in church, but he didn't love Jesus.

His problem was that church was all about HIM!

It was HIS church. It existed for his benefit.

Church was the place he got his purpose in life, a place where he had power and authority... and money.

Judas didn't love Jesus.

Judas loved what he could gain by hanging around Jesus.

And I've seen preachers and Elders and Deacons and Sunday School teachers, etc... who really don't love Jesus.

- They love their building.

I don't know if you've noticed, but we're building a new sanctuary onto this building. One of

the things I've shared about our church is that nobody here really loves our present sanctuary. It's not that impressive. It's functional but it's not the kind of building that you can fall in love with. But this new sanctuary is going to be imposing, it will be attractive, it will be a facility you can get excited about. DON'T. Don't get excited about it. It's a trap. People who fall in love with their buildings often fall out of love with Jesus. Don't go there. Be pleased that we can expand our present facility but don't let this new sanctuary blind you to Jesus. That's the kind of thing that makes Judas-folks out of the best Christians.

- And they love their position of power and authority. They love their turf because those jobs and positions belong to them. One of the things a new couple asked me a few years back was if anybody would mind if they helped with a particular ministry here. They were afraid they might upset someone by stepping on their turf. I told them not to worry. Just step up and help out, and the folks who work in that ministry will scoot over and let them help. We don't have turf here. But Judas kind of folks treasure their turf because church isn't about Jesus for them. It's about THEM.

There are lots of folks who go to church who love the church, but not Jesus. And if I were them I'd be afraid... I'd be VERY afraid.

Now, let's take this one step further.

Judas betrayed Christ. He sold out Jesus for 30 pieces of silver.

He was despised by the early church. He was so despised that the Bible repeatedly referred to as

"Judas Iscariot, who was later to betray him." John 12:4

And in Matthew, Mark, and Luke give us a list of the 12 disciples.

Guess where Judas is placed in all of those lists?

Dead last. And none of the lists are very nice to him.

Matthew and Mark both identify him as "Judas Iscariot, who betrayed (Jesus)" Matthew 10:4

And Luke 6:16 puts it this way: "Judas Iscariot, which also was the traitor."

Judas was NOT very well liked!

He was the betrayer and the traitor. He wasn't a very nice man.

Now, how many of you think Judas should have gone to hell for betraying Christ?

Me too. I think Judas should have gone to hell for betraying Jesus.

In fact, I think anyone who betrays Jesus should go to hell? Don't you?

Jesus does.

Jesus said: "... whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven. (Matthew 10:33 ESV)

So anyone who denies or betrays Jesus deserves to go to hell.

(PAUSE) But then, we have... Peter.

Did Peter betray Jesus?

Yes, 3 TIMES. One time he even curses as says he doesn't know Jesus.

This betrayal so crushed Peter that he didn't think he'd ever be forgiven for what he'd done. There are many scholars who believe that he had given up any hope that Christ would ever accept him back and was determined to go back to fishing and turning his back on this whole Jesus thing.

Peter was crushed by what he had done.

And believe it or not Judas was also crushed by his act of betrayal.

Matthew 27:3-5 tells us that "when Judas, his betrayer, saw that Jesus was condemned, he CHANGED HIS MIND and brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and the elders.

'I HAVE SINNED,' he said, 'for I have betrayed innocent blood.' ...

Judas threw the money into the temple and left. Then he went away and hanged himself."

(PAUSE)

Peter was forgiven

Judas was not.

Why the difference?

Well, the answer can be found in 2 Corinthians 7:10

"...godly grief PRODUCES A REPENTANCE that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief PRODUCES DEATH."

The difference between Peter and Judas was the difference between Godly grief and worldly grief.

Judas experienced grief... but it was a worldly kind of grief.

He was sorry. But he really didn't want to change WHO he was. He was so used to being self-focused/self-absorbed... that he was never going to change.

He COULD have... but he did not WANT to.

And so his grief led to death, and he died a tragic and miserable death.

He was the kind of man who refused to love the truth and so be saved.

Now Peter - on the other hand - experienced Godly grief.

He didn't like WHO he'd become. He didn't like WHAT he'd done.

And he would have given anything to change all that. So when Jesus offered him forgiveness, Peter hungrily took hold of it. He REPENTED. He determined that he was never going to be that man again. He determined he would never betray Jesus ever again.

And Peter's repentance led to salvation, and a life without regret.

He embraced the love and TRUTH of Jesus and it changed his entire life.

(PAUSE)

Now here's the deal: every Christian messes up.

Every Christian betrays Christ at one point or another in their lives.

Every one of us has failed. Every one of us has sinned.

We've all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.

Now, when we first became Christians, God dealt with our sin by having us REPENT of our sins. And then He asked us to allow ourselves to be buried in the waters of baptism to wash away all the guilt and shame of our past.

But then we became Christians.

And we messed up again... and again... and again.

Did God ask us to get baptized again and again every time we sinned?

I think not! If he'd asked that we'd have people lined up at the baptistery 24 hours a day, 7 days a week!

No, once we've become Christians, God has a different way for us to deal with the stain of our sins.

I John 1:7 puts it this way: "If we CONFESS our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness."

We confess our sins. We agree with God that what we've done is wrong and needs to be dealt with. We agree that what we've done has hurt God and needs forgiveness.

And the really cool thing about this is something you can't see in the English translation of this verse. You see, John tells us this is a "continuous action." Every time we confess our sins, God forgives us.

ILLUS: Have you ever driven through a rain storm? What do you do when you're driving in the rain? You turn on your windshield wipers, don't you? Do the wipers just make one swipe and stay put? Of course not. Those wipers sweep back and forth across your windshield wiping away the water so that you can see the road. And you keep those windshield wipers on until you don't need them anymore.

That's what I John 1:7 is talking about. Every time you confess your sins as a Christian, God's forgiveness sweeps away the guilt and shame from your life... over and over again as often as is necessary.

But now, wait a minute!

Do you mean to tell me that it doesn't matter how many times I commit the same sin, God will forgive me of it? That doesn't seem quite right. I mean, won't God know that I'm taking advantage of His mercy and just quit forgiving me after a while?

Well, here's the deal: God's mercy is never ending. As often as you are willing to surrender yourself and humbly confess your sins and ask forgiveness, God promises that He will forgive you. So our sense of guilt for coming back again and again to the throne of God doesn't reflect anything on His grace. Instead it reflects on our weakness.

ILLUS: You see, every person who sins is faced with a conflict in their mind. Psychologists call it "cognitive dissonance." Cognitive Dissonance is when "what I do" conflicts with "what I believe." If I believe something to be sin, and then I do that sin... now my belief is in conflict with my actions. And something has to change. Either I have to change my mind about what I believe to be sin or I have to change my actions. This conflict will continue

until one of those two things happens.

Too often people change their thinking. They either comfort themselves with the falsehood that their sin isn't actually sin, or it isn't as bad a sin as what other do... or they convince themselves of the falsehood that their sin is actually just a reflection of who they are. The action isn't really sin, it's just part of their personality.

OR, the person may change their thinking about being willing to confess their sins. They convince themselves that God really doesn't want to forgive them this sin, over and over again. And they're embarrassed to continually approach God's throne of grace... so they just don't. They STOP confessing their sin. They just give up, because what they do and what they think are in conflict and they just can't handle it.

So how do I deal with this conflict?

How do I deal with the fact that sometimes my sins make me feel like a loser and an annoyance to God? Well, you trust God to help you break the cycle of that sin. You use the tools He has given you to disable sin's power over your life: Church, Bible study and prayer.

ILLUS: How many of you know how to roller skate? When you first learned to skate, did you fall down a lot? Of course you did. Would you fall down as much now as you did then if you tried to skate now? Probably not.

Have you ever watched professional figure skaters on TV? Do they ever fall down? Yeah, but not nearly as often as you or I would. In fact, when they fall down, it's usually when they're doing something that would you kill you or I.

But why don't they fall down as often as we do? It's because they spend so much of their time on skates. For them, skating is as natural as walking because they've spent their entire lives on skates.

In the same way, when Christians first start out as believers, they tend to sin more than they'd like to admit. But the more time they spend in church (being encouraged by other believers) and the more time they spend studying their Bibles, and the more time they spend in prayer to God... the more their lives begin to change. They leave the old ways of life and the change their old ways of thinking and they are more and more driven to live holy and righteous lives.

These people are driven by their love of God's truth and mercy and forgiveness. They trust God to honor His promises and seek to honor Him by their lives.

My point is this: it's not falling into sin that drowns us. It staying IN sin and under its influence in our lives that drowns us. It's accepting the lie that God doesn't care for us and won't forgive us when we fail.

God believes in you, and will work with you to lift you up out of the power that sin can have over you. He loves you too much to leave you in sin because no sinner is EVER so far down that God cannot and will not forgive them of their sin.