Section II - Sifted as Wheat


This part of the conversation at the supper table is important because it shows us Jesus’ perspective on the crisis through which His disciples were about to pass. Technically, it is an address to Peter; but it is really an appropriate word for all of them. This is evident because the plural pronoun is used when Jesus speaks directly to Peter. “Satan,” says Jesus, “has demanded permission to sift you” (plural, not singular) - you, Simon, and also all of your brothers with you. The same idea arises when Jesus tells Peter to use his fall (his denial) to benefit his brothers. The brothers, of course, are not only the other disciples that were then present but everyone who would believe. The Apostles, however, are not to be excluded from the brotherhood. They were also to benefit from Peter’s experience. In fact, they are probably the main people who were the first to benefit.

Look at Jesus’ words in this light: They expressed His insights on the nature of the crisis that the Apostles were going to experience in the future. Note three things in what He said.

A Time for Sifting
First, Jesus regards the crisis as a time for sifting the disciples. Satan, the accuser of the brethren, was skeptical about their faithfulness and integrity, just like he was of Job and all good people. He intended to sift them like wheat and hoped they would turn out to be nothing more than chaff and become apostates like Judas. At the very least, he wanted them to have a miserable and scandalous downfall. In this respect, the final crisis we are studying now was like the one at Capernaum the year before. That also was a time for sifting Christ’s disciples. The chaff and wheat were separated then, and it was discovered that the chaff was out of proportion to the wheat. “Many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him” (Jn. 6:66).

But even though there is a general similarity between the two crises - the minor and the major one - an important difference should be noticed. In the minor crisis (the one that occurred after the feeding of the 5,000), the chosen few were the pure wheat, and the fickle multitude was the chaff. In the major one, they are both wheat and chaff. The sifting is not between man and man, but between the good and the bad, the precious and the vile, in the same man. The hearts of the Eleven faithful ones are going to be searched and all of their hidden weaknesses exposed. The old man must be separated from the new. The vain, self-confident, self-willed, impetuous Simon son of Jonas must be separated from the devoted, chivalrous, heroic, rock-like Peter.
The distinction between the two crises implies that the last one was better suited to search their hearts in a deeper way. Upon reflection, it is obvious that this is true. Consider how different the situations were for the disciples! In the minor crisis, the multitude goes away, but Jesus stays; in the major one, Jesus is taken from the Eleven, and they are left like sheep without a shepherd. There is a great difference between these two. It sufficiently explains the difference in the behavior of the same men on the two occasions. Without a doubt, it was very disappointing and disheartening to see the mass of people, who had recently followed their Master with enthusiasm, dispersing like a crowd that had just seen a play or movie. But while the Master remained, their hearts would not be broken by the defection of phony disciples. They loved Jesus for who He was, not for His popularity or for any other reason. He was their Teacher who could give them the bread of eternal life, and this was what they were looking for. They were not interested in the bread that perishes. He was their Head, their Father, their elder Brother, their spiritual Husband, and they would cling to Him no matter what. Their faithfulness would be like that of a son, brother, or wife. He meant more to them than the whole world. If their future looked bleak even with Him, where could they go that would be any better? They had no choice but to stay where they were.

So, faithfully and courageously they remained with Jesus. What kept them unshakable was their sincerity, a clear understanding of the alternatives, and a fervent love for their Lord. But notice this! When it is not the multitude but Jesus Himself who leaves them, what are they supposed to do? (He is not really forsaking them but is torn away from them by the strong hand of worldly power). Now they can ask Peter’s question, “To whom shall we go?” and become discouraged about the answer. Jesus’ presence was their comfort during a trying and discouraging time. Even when His doctrine was mysterious and His behavior could not be understood, He meant more to them than everything else in the world. But He is ripped from their side. Now they are utterly despondent - without a Master, a champion, a guide, a friend, a father. It gets worse. In losing Him, they not only lose their best friend, but their faith. They had no trouble believing Jesus was the Christ even though the multitude deserted Him. They truly thought this apostasy happened because of ignorance, shallowness, and insincerity. But how can they believe in the messiahship of someone who is led away to prison instead of seated on a throne? Instead of being crowned a king, He is on His way to be executed as a felon. With Jesus being taken away from them in this way, they have lost their Christ as well. The unbelieving world asks them, “Where is your God?” - and they are not able to reply.

The following two thoughts summarize the difference between the two “siftings”: “Christ and we against the world” and “Christ in the hands of the world, and we are left all alone.” The results of the sifting process were also different. In the first one, it caused a separation to occur between those who were sincere and those who were insincere. In the final one, it exposed weakness even
The Sheep Scattered

in those who were sincere. On the earlier occasion, the men stood firm; on the last one, they fled panic-stricken, looking out for their own safety without maintaining their dignity. In at least one case, it was done with shameful disregard for the truth. Note how weak even good men are without faith! With faith, no matter how unrefined or badly informed, you can overcome the world. Without the kind of faith that consciously places God right beside you, you have no chance. Satan will get possession of you and sift you, cause you to lie like Abraham, pretend that you are mad like David, or disguise yourself and swear falsely and profanely like Peter. No one can tell how far you will fall if you lose faith in God. The just live justly and nobly, and only by their faith.

The Sifting: Dangerous, but not Deadly

Secondly, Jesus regards the crisis through which His disciples are going to pass as one that will not be deadly to their faith, though it will be dangerous. His hope is that even if they fall, they will not fall away. Though the sun of their faith is eclipsed, it will not be extinguished. He even has this hope for Peter and makes sure that He prevents a major catastrophe. “I have prayed for you, that your faith doesn’t fail.” And the result was just as He expected. The disciples demonstrated that they were weak in the final crisis, but not wicked. Satan tripped them up, but he did not enter into them nor possess them. In this respect, they differed toto cælo (by the whole heavens; diametrically opposite) from Judas, who not only lost his faith but threw away his love. He abandoned his Lord, defected to the enemy, and became an instrument for accomplishing their wicked purposes. The Eleven, at their very worst, continued faithful to their Master in heart. They neither committed, nor were they capable of committing, acts of disloyalty. Even in fleeing, they identified themselves with the losing side.

But what about Peter? Was he not an exception to this statement? Well, he certainly did more than fail in his faith. And we have no desire to gloss over the seriousness of his offence. Rather, we see it as a sobering illustration of how close the best men may be brought to the worst. At the same time, it needs to be said that there is a vast difference between denying Christ among the servants of the high priest and betraying Him into the hands of the high priest for a sum of money. The latter act is the crime of a traitor who has no principles. The former might be committed by someone who would be true to his master on every occasion except when his personal interests seemed to be at stake. In denying Jesus, Peter thought he was saving himself (by disguising himself) without causing any damage to his Lord. His act resembled Abraham when he circulated the lying story about his wife being his sister in order to protect himself from the violence of unprincipled strangers. That was certainly a very base, selfish act, and most unworthy of the father of all the faithful. Peter’s act was not less corrupt and selfish, but also not more. Both were acts of weakness rather than of wickedness. Very few people would have the right to throw stones at Abraham or Peter. Even those who act like heroes on great occasions will, at other times, act in an unworthy manner. Many people hide and misrepresent their convictions at the dinner table but would boldly proclaim their feelings from the pulpit or some platform. When
they stand in the place where Christ’s servants are expected to speak the truth, they bravely draw their swords to defend their Lord. But when they associate with others who are in the same socio-economic group that they are in, too often they say, “I do not know the man!” Therefore, Peter’s offence, even though serious, is certainly not uncommon. It is virtually committed by multitudes of people who are totally incapable of public and deliberate treason against truth and God. The disciple who made the error was much more remarkable in his repentance than in his sin. Of all the people who virtually deny Christ when they commit acts of weakness, how few, like him, go out and weep bitterly!

Why didn’t Peter fall like Judas, totally and irrevocably? It was due, in part, to a radical difference between the two men. Peter was, at heart, a child of God. Judas, in the core of his being, had been a child of Satan all along. Therefore, we may say that Peter could not have sinned like Judas sinned, nor could Judas have repented as Peter repented. Yet, while we say this, we must not forget that Peter was kept from falling away by special grace that was given to him in answer to his Master’s prayers. We do not know the precise words Jesus used when He prayed for Peter. They were not recorded as the prayer for the Eleven was (Jn. 17). But the meaning of these special prayers is clear from the account given by Jesus to Peter. The Master had prayed that His disciple’s faith might not fail. He had not prayed that he might be exempt from Satan’s sifting process or even kept from falling. Jesus knew that a fall was necessary to show the self-confident disciple his own weakness. He had prayed that Peter’s fall might not ruin him, that his grievous sin might be followed by godly sorrow, not by a hardening of his heart. He prayed that his sorrow would not be the sorrow of the world, like that of Judas, which leads to death. This sorrow is the remorse of a guilty conscience which, like the furies (the three terrible, winged goddesses with serpentine hair - Alecto, Megaera, and Tisiphone - who pursue and punish doers of unavenged crimes), drives the sinner headlong to damnation. And in Peter’s repentance, which happened immediately after his denials, we see the fulfilment of his Master’s prayer. Special grace was given to him in order to melt his heart, overwhelm him with an abundance of grief, and cause him to weep bitterly. The wonderful result was produced, not by his piety or goodness of heart, but by God’s Spirit and God’s providence working toward that end. Except for the cock-crowing, the warning words that Jesus had spoken which came to his mind, the glance of Jesus’ eye, and the tender mercies of his Father in heaven, who can tell what gloomy, demonic thoughts might have gotten hold of the guilty disciple’s heart! Remember how long the godly David gave place to the devil? He harbored the demons of pride, falsehood, and an unrepentant spirit after his grievous fall. Do you see how unlikely it was for Peter, immediately after denying Christ, to come under the blessed influence of a broken and contrite spirit? Do you see how unusual it was that the spiritual crisis through which he passed had a happy ending at all? By grace he was saved, as we all are.
The Spiritual Benefits of Sifting

Jesus considers the crisis that His disciples are about to go through as one which will not only end happily but result in spiritual benefits for them and qualify them to be helpful to others. This is apparent from the command He gives to Peter: “And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers” (Lk. 22:32). Jesus expects the frail disciple to become strong in grace and capable and willing to help those who are weak. He holds this expectation for all of His disciples, but especially for Peter. He assumes that eventually the weakest might, and should, become the strongest. The last first; the greatest sinner, the greatest saint; the most foolish, the wisest, most kind and sympathetic to others.

How encouraging is this gracious, kind view of moral failure for those who have erred! In essence, the Savior says to them, “Sin cannot only be forgiven, but it can even be turned into good, both for yourselves and for others.” Falls, when properly corrected, can become stepping-stones to Christian virtue. They can also provide training, preparing people to become comforters and guides. How much healing is provided for the troubled conscience! People who have erred, and who take their sin seriously, are prone to let their hearts be consumed with their past and waste their time thinking about it. Christ assigns them work to do that is more profitable. “And when you have turned back,” He says to them, “strengthen your brothers. Stop all of your empty regrets over your past which cannot be changed. Devote your heart and soul to works of love. Let your labors help you forgive yourself. May you learn from your faults and foolishness these traits: meekness, patience, compassion, and wisdom which are necessary for successfully carrying on such labors.”

But while very encouraging to those who have sinned, Christ’s words to Simon contain no encouragement to sin. Some people seem to love this teaching - that we are permitted to do evil that good may come from it; that we must be prodigals in order to be good Christians; that a mud bath must precede the washing of regeneration and the baptism of the soul in the Redeemer’s blood. This is a false and harmful doctrine. The Holy One could not be its author. Do evil that good may come, you say? And what if the good does not come? As we have seen, it does not come automatically. Nor is it more likely to come because you make the hope of its coming an excuse for sinning. If the good ever comes, it will come through the narrow gate of repentance. You can only become wise, gracious, meek, sympathetic, and a burden-bearer to the weak by going out first and weeping bitterly. What do you think the chances are that a repentance which melts the heart will show up in someone who believes and acts on the principle that a life of sin is necessary in order to gain insight, a knowledge of self, compassion, and every other kind virtue? Probably the issue surrounding this kind of training is a hardened heart, a seared conscience, a perverted moral judgment, the destruction of every sincere conviction concerning what is right and what is wrong. The opinion that evil leads to good unconsciously transforms itself into the idea that evil is good and prepares the one who believes it to commit sin without shame or reservation.
And dare we to this fancy give,
That had the wild-oat not been sown,
The soil, left barren, scarce had grown
The grain by which a man may live?

Oh, if we held the doctrine sound,
For life outliving heats of youth;
Yet who would preach it as a truth
To those that eddy round and round?

Hold thou the good: define it well:
For fear divine Philosophy
Should push beyond her mark, and be
Procuress to the lords of hell.

- Tennyson, *In Memoriam*, 53

In Peter’s case, good did come out of evil. The sifting in his life became a turning point in his spiritual history. The sifting process resulted in a change which was more thorough than his conversion. There was a turning from sin, not just generally, but specifically. He turned from the sins which had troubled him for a long time with a repentance that was better informed and more fervent. His goal was a new obedience with less self-reliance. This kind of obedience was more reliable anyway. Whereas he had been a child before now - a child of God, yes, but only a child - Peter became a man who was strong in grace and equipped to bear the burden of the weak. Yet it is important to note that Jesus, fully aware of how Peter’s fall would turn out, did not regard it as something to be desired. The Author of our faith had very little sympathy with the teaching that evil may be done so that good may come. He did not say, “I have demanded permission to sift you like wheat.” Rather, He assigns the task of sifting the disciple to the evil spirit who, in the beginning, tempted our first parents to sin by the deceptive argument, “For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil” (Gen. 3:5). He reserves for Himself the role of an intercessor who prays that the evil which has been permitted may be overruled in favor of that which is good. “Satan has desired to have you....I have prayed for you.” What better words than these could be used to convey the idea of guilt and danger? They suggest that Simon is about to do something that the evil one longs to do. This makes it necessary for the Savior of souls to especially pray for him. People must go somewhere else to find support for apologetic or pantheistic views of sin.
Some may think that the reference to Satan tends to weaken moral responsibility by encouraging people to blame their failures on him. Though this is theoretically possible, practically speaking, it is contrary to fact. For those who are soft on sin are also those who do not believe in the devil. Sartorius writes, “The further the age has removed from the idea of a devil, the laxer it has become in the imputation and punishment of sin. The older time, which did not deny the temptations and assaults of the devil, was yet so little inclined on that account to excuse men, that it regarded the neglect of resistance against the evil spirit, or the yielding to him, as the extreme degree of guilt, and exercised against it a judicial severity from which we shrink with horror. The opposite extreme to this strictness is the laxity of recent criminal jurisprudence in which judges and physicians are too much inclined to excuse the guilty from physical or psychical grounds, while the moral judgment of public opinion is slack and indulgent. It is undeniable that to every sin not only a bad will, but also the spell of some temptation, contributes; and when temptation is not ascribed to the devil, the sinner does not, on that account, impute blame to his bad will, but to temptations springing from some other quarter, which he does not derive from sin, but from nature, although nature tempts only when under the influence of sin. The world and the flesh are indeed powers of temptation, not through their natural substance, but through the influence of the bad with which they are infected. But when, as at present, the seduction to evil is referred to sensuality, temperament, physical lusts and passions, circumstances, or fixed ideas, monomanias, etc., guilt is taken off the sinner’s shoulders and laid upon something ethically indifferent or simply natural” (Ernst Sartorius (1797-1859), Die Lehre von der heiligen Liebe).

The perspective Jesus gave on His disciple’s fall cannot, therefore, be accused of weakening the sense of moral responsibility. On the contrary, it tends to inspire a hatred of sin and gives hope to the sinner. It presents any sin that is about to be committed as something to be feared and hated. When it has already been committed, it presents sin as not only forgivable (when true repentance is offered) but as capable of being made useful for spiritual progress. On the one hand, it says to us, “Do not fool around with temptation, for Satan is near, seeking to ruin your soul - ‘fear, and sin not.’” On the other hand, it says, “If any man sin, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous - ‘despair not; forsake your sins and you will find mercy.”