

LOYAL? Matthew 26:63-75

The question of who is loyal or what being loyal actually means is somewhat complex. The word “loyal” is not even used in the King James Version of the Bible. If we search some of the newer translations (such as the NIV) we find it used eight times. Just comparing the KJV with the NIV we see that it can mean such things as faithful, show kindness, support, identify with, be protective, be established, be steadfast, and be true. Those are generally the kind of ideas that come to mind when we think about being loyal.

Everyone apparently has a hierarchy of loyalty. As Christians we can all agree that our first loyalty is to God and then we would start filling out a list with such things as family, nation, employer, etc. Admittedly, we don’t also follow that idealized list and if or when the truth is known we will generally find that our main loyalty is to ourselves. Sometimes that causes problems and in other situations that approach can be good if we are thinking clearly about what actually benefits us. Sometimes that is difficult to do. For example, if we think that temporarily “feeling good” is more important than long term benefits, then we might wind up with an addiction problem. It really is complicated.

The hierarchy of loyalty is really about priorities. We gain significant insight into what a person’s priorities are by the way he deals with questions related to loyalty. In today’s political realm we see a lot of strange things happening and many times the priorities that are typically driving behaviors are personal ambition or ideological issues of which philosophy is going to be in control of our nation. We hear a lot about conservative versus progressive and sometimes secular versus religious values.

The events surrounding the betrayal, arrest, and trial of Jesus are an interesting study of loyalties. The most obvious disloyalty that we think about in this story is that of Judas. The fact that he took money for the betrayal makes us think that it was personal greed that was high on his priority list. However, it may have been (as some have speculated) that his loyalty was to the sovereignty of the nation of Israel and he was dedicated to getting rid of the Roman domination. If Jesus was the Messiah, then the arrest would force Him to exert His divine power and establish the kingdom of God on the earth at that time. That miscalculation is what can happen when a person doesn’t know the whole story and tries to run ahead of God.

The Jewish leaders were dealing with priority issues, also. Their top priority should have been being obedience to God’s commandments and preparation for the Messiah Who was predicted in Daniel’s prophecy to be there at that very time. Their actual priorities were to preserve the status quo and insure their positions of influence with the Roman occupiers and with the common people.

The other disciples were confronted with what could appear to be loyalty issues. There were some initial bravado acts by Peter in an ineffective effort to defend Jesus against being arrested. We are familiar with the accounts that recorded the fact that they either ran off to avoid being arrested or as Peter and John did, followed from a safe distance after they ran off. We hear a lot of remarks from preachers and commentators that this response was either betrayal or something close to it. The kindest thing that is typically said is that they “abandoned” Jesus.

Actually, they did exactly what they should have done! They ran off so that there would not be eleven more crucifixions. “Running away” was in fulfillment of a prophecy from Zechariah 13:7 which has a statement about “strike the shepherd and the sheep will be scattered.” Earlier that evening Jesus had told them that they would run away. If they had been arrested and

killed, then there would have been a need for twelve resurrections rather than one. Otherwise, the invested preparation of these disciples over the past three and a half years would not have resulted in changing the world.

A better description of what happened to the disciples was that they “stumbled” in that they encountered doubts regarding what that had believed about Jesus during their association with Him. As we know, they were still “stumbling” or dealing with doubts even into the evening of the day of the Resurrection as Luke related in his account of the Emmaus Road experience.

After the arrest a lot of things had to happen for which the Jewish leaders were ill prepared. Since their objective was to have Jesus killed, they need to create a story that would give some credibility to what they were going to do. The Sanhedrin was called into session which was unlawful for them to conduct business at night, witnesses had to be found who could bring accusations that Jesus had done something that was worthy of death. That was a failure. All this took time and to give themselves the time they needed to get things together Jesus was taken to Annas who was a former high priest. It is difficult to figure out what Annas was trying to do other than give his son-in-law time to contact the members of the Sanhedrin and find some witnesses. He was not in any official capacity, but he certainly held political power. When he questioned Jesus, Jesus treated it as if Annas was a representative of Jewish authority and as if this was an official court situation. Jesus’ reply was that Annas needed to find witnesses who had heard Him speak. This reflected the rule in Jewish law that a person did not have to testify against himself.

After this mockery Jesus was taken to Caiaphas and the Council. They did have witnesses who could not agree on what Jesus had done because they could not keep their false stories straight. Finally, they had two that said they had heard Jesus say that He would destroy the Temple and rebuild it in three days. Even that was not an accurate account of what was actually said almost three years before this trial. The actual statement was that Jesus told them if “this temple” (meaning His physical body) were destroyed (by the Jews) that He would rebuild it in three days (meaning the resurrection).

Affirmed by Scripture – 26:63-64

⁶³ But Jesus kept silent. And the high priest said to Him, “I adjure You by the living God, that You tell us whether You are the Christ, the Son of God.” ⁶⁴ Jesus said to him, “You have said it *yourself*; nevertheless I tell you, hereafter you will see THE SON OF MAN SITTING AT THE RIGHT HAND OF POWER, and COMING ON THE CLOUDS OF HEAVEN.” Matthew 26:63-64 (NASB95)

Jesus was not going to dignify the false accusations by even speaking to them. However, when challenge with a direct question of His identity, He gave a forthright answer that all could understand.

Following Annas’ failed and illegal attempt to get Jesus to provide self-incriminating evidence to which Jesus responded with instructions to bring witnesses as required by their own laws, we see Caiaphas bringing in false (and thus illegal) witnesses into an illegal meeting of the Sanhedrin. On top of all this, there was no charge of wrong doing made against Jesus that would have justified His arrest and trial. It was very appropriate that Jesus not respond to a confused account of something He had said years before since there was no formal charge. The Jewish leaders had prejudged that Jesus was guilty of “something” and this farce of a trial was a pitiful attempt to find something that He had done wrong.

When all their illegal scheming failed, they finally had to resort to the only issue that really mattered regarding the person Whom they had arrested. Of course, that issue was “Is Jesus of Nazareth the Messiah, the Son of God?” If they were really interested in evidence to

prove a point, there was more than sufficient proof available. However, they did not even bother to look for or examine that evidence. Jesus was now asked to give an oath in God's name regarding Who He Is. He could not deny Himself and, therefore, confirmed His identity. He essentially said to Caiaphas, "It is as you have stated." He then added that from this point onward they would have proof of the truth of Who He is. That proof would be in the form of their seeing evidence that He fulfilled the prophecies in Psalms 110:1 and Daniel 13:7 regarding the Messiah. He summarized this as their seeing the "Son of Man sitting at the right hand of power and in His coming in judgment (on the clouds)" during their lifetime.

Did they actually literally see Jesus sitting next to the throne of God in heaven? Of course not. This was a euphemistic statement that meant they would see the outworking of power that obviously came from God as a result of what Jesus did when He returned to bring judgment on Jerusalem. Did they actually see Jesus coming on the clouds? Obviously, the answer is "no." This was another euphemism in that "coming on the clouds" meant coming in judgment. This statement of Jesus was not describing two separate events but one that was described in two parallel ways.

There is another way to consider Jesus' statement. When Jesus was on the Cross He was bearing the sins of all mankind for all time and at the same time He was bringing judgment and defeat to Satan and dethroning him who claimed to be in control of this world. This situation which was seen and interpreted by most to be a defeat of Jesus was actually His most significant display of power and judgment to ever occur. Those who condemned Him and had Him crucified witnessed this most awesome display and failed to recognize it for what it was.

Denied by His Opponents – 26:65-68

⁶⁵ Then the high priest tore his robes and said, "He has blasphemed! What further need do we have of witnesses? Behold, you have now heard the blasphemy; ⁶⁶ what do you think?" They answered, "He deserves death!" ⁶⁷ Then they spat in His face and beat Him with their fists; and others slapped Him, ⁶⁸ and said, "Prophecy to us, You Christ; who is the one who hit You?" Matthew 26:65-68 (NASB95)

No one should be surprised that Jesus' statement was rejected and that no evidentiary proof was requested. Caiaphas had already determined that the outcome of this sham trial was going to be a verdict of death. To falsely claim to be God or the Son of God was considered blasphemous and that (according to Jewish law) was worthy of death.

In response to hearing blasphemy the high priest tore his clothing which would have been a proper response for a Jew but it was not something that the high priest was allowed to do. In the high emotional state that the Council was in when they were confronted with the earth shaking statement that the Messiah was standing before them, they immediately concluded that Jesus should die. The high emotion of the moment was followed by these people who were supposed to be the elite leadership of the nation acting like a mob of crazed savages in that they literally started hitting and spitting upon Him and mocking Him.

The world system and the religious establishment will not accept the clear word of God or His authority but will literally spit in the face of God and set themselves up above the authority (throne) of the Most High – this is clearly the work of Satan in that it is parallel to what Lucifer did in his rebellion against God (Isa 14:13-14).

Abandoned by His Friends – 26:69-75

⁶⁹ Now Peter was sitting outside in the courtyard, and a servant-girl came to him and said, "You too were with Jesus the Galilean." ⁷⁰ But he denied *it* before them all, saying, "I do not know what you are talking about." ⁷¹ When he had gone out to the gateway, another *servant-girl* saw him and said to those who were there, "This man was with Jesus of Nazareth." ⁷² And again he denied *it* with an oath, "I do not know the man." ⁷³ A little later the bystanders

came up and said to Peter, "Surely you too are *one* of them; for even the way you talk gives you away."⁷⁴ Then he began to curse and swear, "I do not know the man!" And immediately a rooster crowed.⁷⁵ And Peter remembered the word which Jesus had said, "Before a rooster crows, you will deny Me three times." And he went out and wept bitterly. Matthew 26:69-75 (NASB95)

In a society where it is acceptable to be a Christian, we are not likely to deny Jesus as directly as Peter did. Our denials come in the form of lack of action to do those things He commanded us to do. We more-or-less pretend we didn't know we were supposed to feed the hungry, visit those in prison, and clothe the naked. In doing so, we are saying "I don't know what you're talking about." When it becomes uncomfortable for us in the daily routines where we see the needs of others we sometimes withdraw to the sidelines and confine our activities to things "religious" and, in effect, say "I don't know the Man!"

From some of the other gospel accounts, when Peter denied Jesus the third time, Jesus was nearby. It may have been that as they led Jesus out to go to Caiaphas He had to wait in the courtyard. It is likely that the reappearance of Jesus would have sparked the renewed questioning of Peter. He was likely acting in a nervous fashion and looking intently at Jesus as He was being lead through the courtyard. This intense interest would have made others think there were some connections between the two. The fear and the uncertainty plus the lack of spiritual maturity caused Peter to deny Jesus.

Sometimes we attempt to take up for Peter by making the statement "at least Peter was there." At the same time, we will criticize him for "following from afar." The fact that he was there at all was evidence of his pride and confidence in himself which got him into a situation where he was exposed to danger and had to lie and deny. If Peter had heeded the warning of Jesus earlier that day that he would deny Jesus, then he would have fled like the others did and stayed away from the place where he would face such temptation. If he had listened to and followed the words of Jesus during the arrest in the garden when Jesus said "Let these go their way," he would have saved himself from being put into such a compromising position.

Peter was a disciple of Jesus, but he was not a possessor of God's power. His pride had put him in a position for his strength to be tested and he discovered that he was not as strong as he had imagined he was. At that point he was a believer without benefit. Later on, there would be times when he and the other disciples would find themselves in situations of danger because of their obedience to what God had called them to do. However, in those situations, God's power was available to them.

As we can appreciate from the life of Christ, there were times during that three and a half year period when Jesus withdrew from the areas of danger and continued His ministry and message in other areas. We need to develop a sense of timing to realize when open or overt testimony is needed or if a more subtle witness would be more effective. Peter would have plenty of opportunities to be bold later on as the truth of what Jesus had done was declared in miracles and in power to the Jews who had rejected Him.

All of us have many opportunities to answer the question of "loyalty" in the personal, internal decisions we make, the attitudes we adopt, and the way we interact with others. We have an advantage in that the presence and power of God that enabled Jesus to faithfully fulfill His calling and mission is always with us.