

The Third Sunday after Pentecost, June 21, 2020

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Confess or Deny—What Will It Be?

Matthew 10:21–33

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Eph 1:2

Jesus said, **“Whoever confesses Me before men, I also will confess before My Father who is in heaven. But whoever denies Me before men, I will also deny before My Father who is in heaven”** (vv 32–33 NKJV alt).

These words of Jesus are serious. They cannot be taken lightly. They include a great promise—**“Those who confess Me I will confess before My Father who is in heaven”**—and a terrible warning—**“Those who deny Me I will also deny before My Father who is in heaven”** (vv 32–33). When we hear these words, we can’t help but stop and pray. Lord, help us! Help us not to deny You! Help us to confess You!

Clearly Jesus knows His followers will be questioned. And so we are. We get asked questions about what we believe, questions about how we live, questions about who Jesus is and what He means to us. Sometimes these questions get asked out loud, but not always. There are unspoken questions too—unspoken questions in the hearts of those who listen to us and watch us. Just think of children. They hear and see everything! Some are “honest” questions, motivated by curiosity and interest. Others are simply intended to mock us and belittle us. That’s why Jesus tells His disciples to **be wise as serpents and innocent as doves** (Mt 10:16).

No one said that confessing Jesus before others would be easy, least of all Him. It is challenging. Sooner or later there will be opposition, and sometimes even suffering.

3.

Still, Jesus only offers two alternatives: confess Him or deny Him. There’s no third way. Silence isn’t an option. You and I both know that saying nothing often says a great deal. Neutrality isn’t possible. There’s no Switzerland between the kingdom of Christ and the power of the devil. We also see here difference from Islam. Islam has a doctrine called *taqiyyah* that allows Muslims to hide their beliefs and even stop their religious practices when in danger. Christianity doesn’t. When asked, Jesus makes no allowance for hiding your faith or for pretending like you’re not a Christian. He offers no category for

believing Him in your heart but denying Him in your life. Christians are called to be Christian inside and out, through-and-through, to be whole-life, lifelong followers of Jesus in heart, soul, mind, and strength. You can't sort of confess Jesus or maybe confess Him or confess Him only when the winds are favorable. It's *either* confess *or* deny.

By now, St. Peter has probably come to mind. Yes, he denied Jesus three times. But remember that before he denied Jesus, he also confessed the Lord. In the region of Caesarea Philippi, Jesus asked the disciples, **"Who do you say that I am?"** Guess who pipes up? **Simon Peter replied, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God"** (Mt 16:15–16). You're right! That's a good confession. **"Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah!"** (Mt 16:17). The trouble came later. It came when St. Peter was asked by a servant girl around a fire in a courtyard in the middle of the night. **"Aren't you a Christian? What are *you* doing here?"** Fear grabbed hold. You can almost feel the cold sweat trickling down his back and the pounding of his heart in his chest. He wasn't ready. He was weak. He was faithless. He took his eyes off Jesus. So **he denied it before them all, denied it with an oath, denied it finally with a curse on himself: "I don't know the man!"** (Mt 26:69–75). St. Peter both confessed Jesus and denied Jesus. So where does that leave him?

Our lives and our conversations confess or deny Jesus, too. We know that our words matter, but our actions also matter. We confess or deny Jesus by how we spend our time, our energy, and our money. We confess or deny Jesus by what we read, watch, and listen—through TV, internet, and cell phones. We confess or deny Jesus by the jokes we tell and the comments we make. So maybe we "talk-the-talk," but how well do we walk? **"Follow Me,"** Jesus said (Mt 4:19 and others). That's not just a metaphor. It's a way of life. **"Follow Me. I am the Way"** (Mt 4:19; John 14:6). In the Book of Acts Christians are even called members of "the Way" (see 9:2).

In a normal year, today would be Consecration Sunday for us, a day for us to renew our confirmation vows and offer ourselves in service to one another in this congregation. So I ask you those questions now: Do you intend to live according to the Word of God, and in faith, word, and deed to remain true to God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, even to death? Do you intend to continue steadfast in this confession and Church and to suffer all, even death, rather than fall away from it? We can only say, *"I do, by the grace of God."* By the grace of God. Not by my own strength or power, but by the grace of God. The grace of God connects our faith with our lives. By grace we confess. By grace we live. When St. Peter confessed that Jesus is the Son of the living God, that was the gracious work of God in his life. Jesus told him, **"Flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven"** (Mt 16:17).

2.

Whoever confesses Me before men, Jesus says. Yet He also tells the disciples to **beware of men** (Mt 10:17). We live our lives in the presence of other human beings, not off by ourselves. We live before others. Jesus makes no distinction between private and public lives. We confess Christ, or we deny Him, before others, in front of other people. Jesus tells the disciples that they **will be dragged before governors and kings** for His sake (Mt 10:18). A bit closer to home, He also mentions brothers and fathers and children and parents (Mt 10:21). You'll probably never be asked to confess Christ before a king, but you'll have many opportunities to confess Him before family, friends, and coworkers.

This is what we do every Sunday. We confess Christ Jesus before others. We confess Jesus in front of each other *and* to each other. We say, *"I believe in Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God"* (Nicene Creed). This is one of the reasons we need each other as Christians and the community of the Church. Together we learn to confess Christ. Here, among friends and fellow believers, where it is safe to make this confession, we say the words. Our mouths form and shape them. Here we begin to embody the confession. Here we begin taking our first steps in following Jesus, even if our first steps are no better than that of a one-year-old just beginning to walk. Here our lives are slowly pressed into the shape of Christ and His cross. This confession isn't something we've made up or created. It's given to us. It has been revealed in the Scriptures and handed down by the Church. So Sunday after Sunday we do confess Jesus before others.

The looming question, of course, is whether this is enough. For all the times we've confessed Christ in the Creeds, we also know the many times we've denied Him by our words and lives. We've confessed Him, and we've denied Him. We are St. Peter. So where does that leave us? Will Jesus confess us before His Father in heaven, or will He deny us?

1.

The context in which Jesus says these words about confessing Him and denying Him is helpful. Even as He warns of the persecution and danger awaiting the disciples, He also comforts them. Jesus says, **"Have no fear"** (Mt 10:26). He says, **"Don't fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul"** (Mt 10:28). Then He says, **"Aren't two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. But even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not, therefore, you are of more value than many sparrows"** (Mt 10:29–31). Those don't sound like the words of someone expecting to deny us.

Along with Jesus' words, there's also the confession of His life. What do His actions say? Standing before Caiaphas and Pontius Pilate, what does Jesus confess? He

confesses that He is the Christ, the Son of God. In the very same moment that St. Peter was outside denying Him, Jesus was inside confessing Himself. And what do the nails driven into His hands confess? Every hammer blow confesses that your sins have been paid for. What do the thorns pressed into His brow confess? They confess His body given for you and His blood shed for you. What do the blood and the water that flow from His pierced side confess? Every drop confesses that He is your Savior. From His side to your baptism and into the communion cup, each drop confesses that He died for you. Rather than deny Himself, rather than deny the forgiveness that He came to win, Jesus died. He gave His life to confess you.

In St. Timothy we hear this trustworthy saying, **“If we have died with Him, we will also live with Him; if we endure, we will also reign with Him; if we deny Him, He also will deny us; if we are faithless, He remains faithful—for He cannot deny Himself”** (2 Tim 2:11–13). After Jesus rose from the dead, He appeared to St. Peter by the Sea of Galilee. There, He didn’t deny Peter. He restored him. He forgave his sins. Jesus cannot deny His own blood. He cannot deny His death on the cross. He cannot deny those baptized into His death and resurrection. Even as we waver between confessing Jesus and denying Him, we plead not our own confession or our faithfulness. We plead His faithfulness. We plead His death for us. We plead those nails and thorns and the spear in His side.

THIS IS OUR CONFESSION: CHRIST DIED FOR SINNERS LIKE US.

We aren’t under the law but under His grace. We have a gracious Lord. Knowing our Lord and Savior who gave Himself for us, we are emboldened to confess Him before others. Consider just who the other human beings are before who we confess Christ. They are sinners just like us, sinners in need of a gracious and forgiving God just like us, sinners in need of the nails and the thorns and the spear in His side. This is why we confess Christ, because I have no salvation apart from Him, nothing apart from Him. Because I need His forgiveness so desperately.

So Jesus confessed your forgiveness by dying on the cross. He wrote your name on the palms of His hands. He inscribed you on His heart. He put your name in the book of life with His blood. When He comes again in glory and stands before the Father, will He deny you? Will He deny this? Will He deny what He has done for you? No, He will confess you—He will confess you totally and completely forgiven!

The peace that passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

Phil 4:7
