

Sermon *Christ Remains Faithful*  
The Very Rev. David J. Marshall, All Angels 10.12.25

Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7  
Psalm 66:1-11  
2 Timothy 2:8-15  
Luke 17:11-19

This past Tuesday, at our Men's Discussion Group meeting, I read the first half of the reading from 2<sup>nd</sup> Timothy to see what they thought. I had a question on it but I wanted to see if they'd have the same question as me. Here it is:

*The saying is sure:*

*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 will also deny us;*

*if we are faithless, he remains faithful – for he cannot deny himself.*

The group came alive when I read the third “if” phrase – ***if we deny him, he will also deny us.*** Here are some of their questions: is this really in the Bible? Does this sound like Jesus? How certain can we be about the translation of “deny” because it's been translated so many times over the years? Isn't this something that you'd hear at a grade school playfield. After they quieted down a bit, one of the men said that it just doesn't sound like the magnanimous Jesus. The last sentence, *if we are faithless, he remains faithful*, that sounds like Jesus but the line before it does not.

Their reaction told me that I should preach on it. I've never preached on this before because, as highlighted by the men, it doesn't sound like Jesus. But there is more to it than that. Spiritually speaking, I am worried about this passage. I wonder about how many times have I denied Christ. The Scripture readings this past month remind us that we cannot serve two masters. We are given choices of who to follow. Are we to trust in our own devices and desires or are we to follow the One who gives life. Yet, here I am, a human and a priest. Do I try to serve two masters?

I had a meeting last week with the Church Pension Group to make sure I'm saving correctly for retirement. Is a good retirement my master? Or do I put my trust in Christ? Every month I get the Treasurer's Report. I get sweaty palms before reading it. There is no reason for it. We have generous parishioners who support All Angels and our mission and ministry in their charitable giving. We have an excellent team who work on expenses, and we have a long history of living within, and below, our means. Above all, my faith should make it so I don't get nervous. But, from time to time, or, perhaps once a month, I do get nervous before I read it. (Then, when I do read it, it is good news, I give thanks to God and then feel silly for being worried in the first place) Am I denying Christ when I get nervous? What about my desire to have a good retirement? Does that deny Christ? Let me not forget that from time to time I read about all the stuff in the newspaper and I get anxious. And then I wonder not if I am denying Christ but when am I not denying Christ.

At my previous parish in San Diego, a parishioner who was good with woodworking asked what Bible phrase I'd like to have carved into wood. I said: *He will never leave you or forsake you.* The parishioner sounded surprised. He said, "I thought you'd want 'I am the resurrection and the life.'" I told him that I believe that all the time. What I need to be reminded of, however, is that God will not leave me or forsake me. It's in my office right now next to the clock so when I look at the time I am reminded of God's love and promise.

In the corporation I worked for prior to seminary, they taught us to seek the question behind the question. When we got a question from a shareholder, like, "What do you think of the unfavorable fire danger this year especially with the downward pressure on the bond market?" We would look for the question behind the question which was usually this: is my investment safe from factors outside of our control? Instead of talking about fire suppression methods, the efficiency of drone technology for fire surveillance, and our estimate of the bond market, we would instead talk about the safety of investments and the company's 110-year history with providing dividends for shareholders.

What is my question behind the question when it comes to wanting to know what the men's group thought of "if you deny Christ, he'll deny you." The root is the same for why I look at the phrase, "He will never leave you or forsake you," – I don't want to be abandoned from God. Yet, I also know I am human in a material world. I make mistakes, I try to do things with my own power and wisdom and sometimes forget to trust in the One who makes all things. I'd like some reassurances in my humanity that Jesus will understand, forgive, and even if I trust in my own power from time to time (or get sweaty palms before I read the treasurer's report), he will never, ever leave me or forsake me.

Seeking reassurance, I spent a good amount of time last week digging deep into the text. To answer the *how can it be reliable if it's been translated a number of times into different languages* I read it in Greek (it was originally written in Greek and then translated to English). I studied the historicity of it. In particular, I looked at what "denying" meant in the first century in western Turkey to the people the Apostle Paul was writing to (the church at Ephesus).

First, let's look at the history of it. Paul was quoting someone else. He has five different phrases in his many letters; this is one of them. Some have origins that are more obvious – like hymnody, or an inscription he read on a stone monument, or a common Greek poem (*we live and move and have our being*), or a phrase from Jesus (*it is better to give than receive*). This one, however, remains a mystery. Reading it in Greek helps because it has a poetic nature – which tells this priest that it was not from Hebrew, but its origin is in fact Greek. Line three – the one with denying – has a different metric weighting than lines 1, 2 and 4 (like how a limerick is composed). But that research doesn't get to the root of the matter.

Second, I looked at the repeating word of each phrase translated into English, "if". It is "ei" in Greek (pronounced "a" as in "day" or "say"). There are a few ways that "ei" can be translated from Greek into English. The primary way is as follows: *if-this/then-that*. In the Gospel of John, Jesus said, "If they were not of this world then they would be fighting for my release." (18:36)

That's the typical "if/then" structure in Greek. The quote from Paul (if you deny, Christ will deny), doesn't follow the if/then pattern.

This priest believes it must have the second meaning in Greek, translated into English as "because". If we swap the "if" for "because" it reads like this: "Because we died with him, we will live with him." That passage, incidentally, is probably referring to baptism. In our baptismal rite, there is no "if" we died with him. Our theology is that we died with Christ in our baptism. Because we died with him, we will live with him (because he is alive, amen and alleluia!). I think "because" is a better rendering of "ei" in Greek to English. So, let's take a look at the third stanza – *because we denied him, he will deny us*. I think we're getting closer to the meaning of it, but there is more to cover.

In the 1<sup>st</sup> century, there was a ritual where each member of the Roman Empire was required to show up at the town square, take a pinch of incense, drop it in the fire, and say Ceasar Kyrios (Caesar is lord). People of the Jewish faith were exempt from this practice because their faith system was older than the empire. Christians, from what we can glean from history, were exempt for a while but then, probably after the time Paul wrote to Timothy, they had to participate in the event. I'd also like to point out that this was not objectionable to other religions (except Judaism) of the day because it was a polytheistic empire. It became objectionable to Christians as we started to say, out loud, that Christos Kyrios. ... in other words, not Ceasar but Christos. To not put incense in the fire was to deny the Ceasar of honor. The penalty for not doing it was high. There is thin evidence to show at the time of writing that this was a concern. In the second and certainly the third century, it was a big deal; but it appears it wasn't such a concern in Timothy's day.

So what is denying Christ and why would that cause Christ to deny the one who denied him?

To answer that central question, I look to the 38<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Book of Job. The oldest written book in the Bible, it tackles many questions we have to this day; in particular, why do bad things happen to good people. In chapter 38, God questions Job if he, Job, was present when he set the foundations of the world? Was he there when God created the ocean and contained it with the shoreline? The obvious answer is no. But, to deny Christ is to deny God of God's power. I don't think that Job did.

In the movie, *The Shift*, there is a man who is having a really bad day. He's at a restaurant. Sitting across the table from him is the devil. The man has come to the end of his rope. He bows his head and prays. As he prays, the devil mocks him, then tells him that he's "damaged goods" and that God doesn't want him or his prayers. As the man continues to ask for help from God, the devil gets more and more agitated until he shouts, "I am more powerful than you. I am more powerful than Him!" There is silence. The man looks up, and the devil is gone. That scene reminds the viewers that the evil one denies who Christ is and who God is by asserting that he is more powerful.

If God was asking the devil, not Job, about "where you there when...", I think the answer might be different. If I believe that I am more powerful than Christ, then I am denying him. Or, more to

the point, “because I denied him (and his power and instead asserted my power over him) he will deny me.”

One last thing about this trustworthy saying from Paul. The last line, *Christ cannot deny who he is*, is very important. There are two forms of writing in Greek that prove a point. The first one is the introductory statement that can be repeated and proven in each line. For instance, “Christ died to save sinners” is an opening line that can be repeated. Another way to write is to make the last line the most important and that it too can be repeated for each of the above stanzas. In this case, “Christ cannot deny himself.” Here is how it reads:

*Because we have died with him, we will also live with him;* because he cannot deny himself.  
*because we endure, we will also reign with him;* because he cannot deny himself.  
*because we deny him, he will also deny us;* because he cannot deny himself.  
*because we are faithless, he remains faithful* because he cannot deny himself.

This gives me joy: *Because we deny him he will deny us because he cannot deny himself.* We believe Christ is in us and we are in Christ. If we deny him then he will deny because he himself is in us and he cannot deny himself. There’s one thing that Christ cannot do and that is deny himself.

The best part about this passage of Scripture; the reason why I believe this is Good News; is the fourth line. It makes me happy every time I think about it. *Because we are faithless, he remains faithful because he cannot deny himself.* “Faithless” in this passage is being unfaithful in a relationship. We seek other gods; we follow our own devices and desires; but Christ does not. Christ is faithful. Amen and alleluia!

We are going to fail, we are going to be worried about the monthly treasurer’s report, we are going to think about the goods and services of the world and place things in front of our relationship with Christ. It’s what we as humans do. Christ came to save sinners. Christ is also faithful; he cannot deny himself. He is in us. He cannot deny himself. We can be unfaithful. It’s a part of our nature. We can be unfaithful, but Christ cannot.

This is the good news of this passage: Christ is faithful! I am going to make mistakes. I am going to be led astray from time to time, I’m going to be worried and think everything is up to my own strength. But Christ is different. He will be faithful. He will not leave. He will not forsake. He cannot deny who he is. Amen and alleluia!