

Let's pray to get us started. I'm standing in the need of prayer this morning. Let's pray, and then we'll begin.

Lord, we commit this time to you. We thank you for chapel, for what it means to our community. And Lord, we just devote ourselves, whether it's me up here, Lord, speaking or those that are listening. God, I pray that you would just do with this time what you would like. Lord, we invite your spirit into this space. We thank you for joining us. Lord, we just commit the time to you. So we pray these things in your name. Amen.

We're continuing with the second of two parts today on Cautionary Tales. Stories in Scripture that act like warning signs, and in our case of this semester, helping us avoid the disintegration that can happen when what's outside or outside of us doesn't match what's on the inside. A couple of months ago, and I can't believe that it's been two months already, but we talked about Samson. You'll recall very briefly, Samson, who was gifted, who he himself was chosen and empowered, but a man who was, in many ways, internally fractured. Samson possessed incredible physical strength, but was not strong enough to govern his own desires. We looked at the caution of a disintegrated life and how God and his word call us instead to integrity.

I realized, though, as I was listening back to those words and reading through them again, I never really explained this choice of topic to you. I just launched it on you. I'm sure to you, cautionary tales seems pretty, maybe even random. Maybe just an idea to toss out there to see what sticks or an interesting way to frame some Scripture during a chapel, right? But what I want you to know is, whether today's message or if you go back and listen to really any of the other messages that I've had the opportunity to give attached to this series or not. When I say yes to doing this role, the dean of students role here at Cairn, when I said yes to that and I knew that chapel speaking would be a part of that responsibility, I set out to start speaking on the things that I wish I heard more of during my time in your seat in undergrad. There's three filtering questions that I use when thinking on what to say during a chapel. Lord, what do you want to say to our community? How are you at work in the lives of our students right now, and how might you want to speak to that? And lastly, I ask, what aspects of my own experience as an undergrad of Cairn are those that still have relevance today, and how do you want to speak to those things?

So with those things in mind, today, I want to explore a different fracture in the cautionary tales that warn of it. I want to look at today when our proximity to God or to church or to spiritual things gives us the illusion of spiritual health. When we mistake familiarity with Jesus for a relationship with Jesus, not the same thing. When we think about being around God and the things of God as not being the same as belonging to God. This is maybe one of the most subtle or dangerous forms of disintegration. And the reason I'm spending time with it is because when I answer my third filtering question that I just went through, I think on my own Cairn experience. This topic comes to mind for me, right? I think about our community. Our community practices and values proximity to God and his church and his word and the formation of a spiritual life rooted in Christ. But the proximity we value, it's a byproduct. It's not the main goal.

But when we take 30 plus credits of Bible or theology courses, when we gather for chapel multiple times per week, when we regard ministry highly and hold it as an expectation for graduation, we bring about the opportunity for spiritual formation and for discipleship. Absolutely. That saturation is a good thing that we prize. But the door is also open to familiarity. A familiarity that isn't faithfulness or that isn't obedience. And for that, we need to take caution. So I want to spend time with that and call that out because the response certainly is not to distance ourselves from God, quite the opposite. But that invitation is coming later. I'm getting ahead of myself.

To explore this, we're going to look at a couple of different things, actually several, over the course of just a few minutes. It's going to probably happen pretty quickly. We're going to look not just at Judas Iscariot, though his story does set the pattern for what we're talking about, but then also at a handful of others throughout Scripture whose closeness to the things of God did not translate into things like surrender or affection or obedience. The overarching text I want to use this morning that serves as an overarching text for the cautionary tales from Matthew 7, near the conclusion of the Sermon on the

Mount. Jesus has, at this point in the Sermon on the Mount, he's given us in Matthew 5 and 6, the picture of Kingdom life. He's talked about the precepts of Kingdom life. He's outlined some of even the practices of Kingdom living and what that is supposed to look like. But in chapter 7, he moves to that which proves Kingdom life. That's what we're picking up, what Jesus is reading here, starting in verse 17. "So every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus, you will recognize them by their fruits." The heading, it's not in the canon, but in this case it actually is, the heading over this next section, it's titled, I Never knew You. It goes on to say this in 21, "Not everyone who says to me, 'lord, lord,' will enter the Kingdom of Heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day, many will say to me, 'lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and cast out demons in your name and do many muddy works in your name?' Then I will declare to 'I never knew you. Depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'" Similarly, I want you to hear this from Isaiah 29:13, where it says this, "And the Lord said, 'Because this people draw near with their mouth and honor me with their lips while their hearts are far from me, and their fear of me is a commandment taught by man.'"

Where we're driving at today is the difference between knowing of God and knowing God. And that's where I want to dive in. I want to start with a cautionary tale of Judas Iscariot. Judas is an interesting character, right? He's one where if, like me, I remember it's not a vivid memory, but it's a memory I have in Sunday school, you read the story of the Gospels and you learn that Judas is the one who's going to betray Jesus. It's made very clear very soon. I remember then going back, maybe in middle school, and He's thinking through of like, I need to go back and see what this dude was doing. But I didn't realize this until the end. I got to go back and read what he was doing. He ministered with Jesus for three years. He was chosen as one of the twelve, the same as the other eleven.

Chosen.

He saw the miracles firsthand, water to wine, demons cast out, healings done, Lazarus raised more. He saw them all firsthand. He participated in ministry. He also handled the money bag the group, which means that in some sense people trusted him. But in John 12, when Mary anoints Jesus with expensive perfume, Judas responds with a line that sounds vaguely spiritual.

Maybe in a tone of like, whoa, why wasn't this sold and given to the poor? This expensive perfume? Why wasn't this sold and that money given to the poor? But John adds, and it reads right in the Scripture. It reads as a footnote, but it says it just a moment later. He, meaning Judas, he didn't care about the poor. He was stealing. Here's the caution. You and I, we can speak the language of faith without having an actual faithful life. You can be close to Jesus, even physically, as Judas' example is, while distant from him spiritually. Said another way, you can be enrolled in Bible courses, maybe a lot of them. You can have your butt in a seat at church on a Sunday. You can even be serving in different ministry capacities. But if it's all just noise, then that's all it is, noise. And that's sobering, because for us, when we read through this, Judas's collapse wasn't sudden. It wasn't like you see in the movies or on TV, where he exchanges for the 30 pieces of silver, and then the record scratch happens, and he's like, Yeah, that's me. You're probably wondering how I got here. That's not what's happening. Judas's collapse wasn't sudden. It was probably slow.

It was subtle. It was a drift. That's something worth our considering because proximity does not equal relationship.

The next cautionary tale I want to point us to is in 1 Samuel 2. I'm going to pick it up in 12. I'm going to read it to you. It's a little extended, but bear with me. "Now, the sons of Eli were worthless men. They did not know the Lord. The custom of the priests with the people was that when any man offered sacrifice, the priest's servant would come. While the meat was boiling with a three-prong fork in his hand, and he would thrust it into the pan or kettle or cauldron or pot. All that the fork brought up, the priest would take for himself. This is what they did at Shiloh to all the Israelites who came there. Moreover, before the fat was burned, the priest's servant would come and say to the man who was sacrificing, 'Give meat for the priest to roast, for he will not accept boiled meat from you, but only that which is raw.' And if the man 'I said to him, 'Let them burn the fat first and then take as much as you

wish, ' he would say, 'No, you must give it now, and if not, I will take it by force.' Thus the sin of the young man was very great in the sight of the Lord, for the men treated the offering of the Lord with contempt." I'll pick it up again then in 22. "Now Eli, the father of these two, was very old, and he kept hearing all that his sons were doing to all Israel and how they lay with the women who were serving at the entrance to the tent of meeting. And he said to them, 'Why do you do such things?' 'For I hear of your evil dealings from all these people.' 'No, my sons, it is no good report that I hear the people of the Lord spreading abroad.' If someone sins against a man, God will mediate for him. But if someone sins against the Lord, who can intercede for him? But they would not listen to the voice of their Father, for it was the will of the Lord to put them to death."

These two were named Hophni and Phinehas. They grew up in the center of Israel's worship life, being the sons of Eli, and then coming into the roles that they played. They knew the sacrifices, they knew the rituals, they served as priests. You see, these two, they were around holy things their entire lives, but their hearts were far from God behind those things.

The Scripture says that they treated the Lord's offering with contempt. They use their position for power, we read about for pleasure, and self-interest. This is one of the strongest warnings to any Christian community in some ways. It's possible to do ministry, to be in it and doing the work without being submitted to the God that we're ministering for. You can know the songs, we can serve on the teams, we can attend chapel, we can even be doing it, we can be giving good advice, we can be relationally in conversation, ministering with, potentially even praying with people, right? Giving good advice. And we can still be spiritually numb. I draw our attention to the fact that proximity, again, does not equal relationship.

There's too much ground to cover in any one singular story on this person's life, but the third account I want to bring before you is King Saul. That would come out of 1 Samuel 9 through 15. But Saul had spiritual experiences that maybe some would envy. He was anointed early in life by Samuel. He prophesied with other prophets, the spirit of the Lord was upon him. All sounding good, trending the right direction. But Saul cared more about managing his image than he cared about obeying God. He ended up fearing people's opinions more than fearing God's voice. And he had access to God's power, but he had no affection or very little affection for God's heart. And so then what's the result of that? Spiritually impressive beginnings do not guarantee spiritually faithful endings. Saul is a cautionary tale that you can be called, you can be gifted, you can be anointed and still drift if you don't surrender.

Another example in a cautionary tale of where proximity does not equal relationship. The next one is from 2 Timothy 4:10. I'll read actually the expanded section because I want you to get an idea for what Paul is writing. He says this, Paul is speaking, "Do your best to come to me soon, for Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica. Crescens has gone to Galatia, Titus to Dalmatia, Luke is alone with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is very useful to me for ministry. Tachikis, I have sent to Ephesus. When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas. Also the books, and above all, the parchments. Alexander the Coppersmith did me great harm. The Lord will repay him according to his deeds. Beware of him yourself, for he strongly opposed our message."

I'll read the whole section because I want you to get the idea. Paul's doing a little bit of housekeeping here. It's not attendance, but he's rolling through of like, Okay, who's in the work with me? It's a passing sentence almost. You can gloss over it very quickly, but in 10 about this Demas. He did ministry with Paul. He was on the missionary journey. He traveled, he served, he helped start and build churches. But when life grew difficult, Paul writes what? Demas has deserted me because he loved this present world. Again, it's a quick example, but note something here. This is all we read about here in 2 Timothy, but this isn't apostatizing loudly. This isn't flaring out and going out, burning very hot at the very end and then walking away. This is a drift, and it drifts quite quietly in this case.

And Paul makes note of it here. Demas shows us that love for the world can quietly replace love for Jesus if we never acknowledge and confront it. Proximity does not equal relationship.

What I want to get at this morning by sharing these stories with you, and I know that in terms of

reading them, it can all happen very quickly. They're not long stories in many ways. But every one of these stories, it shares a pattern. That's what I want us to think on a little bit of, where do we potentially see these patterns in ourselves? In all these stories, the pattern goes like this. For some, they knew the language, the words to say, the phrasing to use, the way that people who follow God sound. I'm not just talking about the hedges of protection and the things that we say in Christian circles, but there's a certain sound to the way about church or to Christian life together. These people knew the rituals. They knew the rhythms, the routines about what it means to follow God. They knew the environment. For some of them, They were born into the environment. I resonate with that. My dad was the associate pastor of the church that I grew up in. For 20 years of my life, the church is where I'm at, not just on Sundays, but three or four days a week in in some ways.

You grow up in an environment and you become potentially desensitized to an environment. It just becomes so familiar because between youth group and maybe a small group and church on a Sunday, and in my case, it was then also a Christian home and Christian school, but it also became like, this is just the nature of what it is. Did I become desensitized to these things? Did I know the environment? Was I almost too familiar with the environment? I didn't realize what a gift that was.

The other pattern is that they know the expectations, that for many of these stories we talk about, they know the cost, but they knew how to keep themselves in control of what they were willing to pay, so to speak. That's the crux of it. They didn't surrender. In each of these different tales that we read through, they didn't surrender their hearts. There's not full surrender in these stories. They were willing to pay the cost of nearness to God, which is one price, but they weren't willing to pay the price of obedience. It's in that gap, the space between that outward closeness and inward lukewarmness, or maybe even inward coldness.

That's where spiritual disintegration begins. The cracks can start to form there. This is why Jesus tells the crowds then in Matthew 15, "These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me." Spiritual familiarity can become, and I think of a Dr. McAlack chapel from a spring ago about drifting. Spiritual familiarity can become a spiritual sleep walking of sorts. What do we do with that? What do we do with that reality? How do we acknowledge these things rightly? Because while this message may convict us, the message is not meant to shame us. Cautionary tales are ones that we read and we listen to, and then hopefully we learn from. They are meant to clarify and to instruct and to invite. I think it's easy for us to know that Jesus is not pushing you nor I away. He never did that even to Judas. Knowing Judas's heart, which he knew, he knew Judas's heart and still did not push him away. He knows our hearts the same exact way. Jesus is inviting you closer. Not not closer to the point of greater activity or even to striving and to greater works, but to intimacy that compels you to pursue those works rightly.

Not to performance, but into his presence and to use your gifts as an act of worship in that presence. Jesus is inviting you closer not to knowledge of the things of God, the ability to wield theological facts and to win arguments, but to surrender your life in fullness to him. If you have surrender, you won't have the insecurity of needing to be right about anything except for being in right relationship with the one who is. Again, don't forget what I said earlier. Our community prizes proximity with these things. We want to know about God's word and about theology. It's not a thing that we shouldn't prize or strive after, but it's where is this as it pertains to, have I given this the appropriate affections in my heart and in my mind as it pertains to my relationship with God? Here then is a question for us today. Where have I settled for being near Jesus instead of knowing him? Maybe, like I said just a few moments ago, you've been relying on your upbringing in some way, the familiarity of Christian spaces. It's one thing in your testimony of acknowledging of how you came to the Lord thinking through it.

Mine is a keeping testimony. There's nothing terribly dramatic about it. It's quite boring, but I praise God for the boringness of that in the sense of what that meant for me throughout my life and today. But have I settled for a nearness of just, well, when I think on my stomping grounds of the place that I come from or who my parents are or who my parents are to the church or to a ministry or to the work of God? Is there some type of subconscious allowing that to, that'll win the day for me. I'll come around to it when they came around to it. The time for the work is now. The time to answer these questions is yesterday in some ways. Maybe it's on your involvement or your reputation thinking that.

Again, we don't think these things out loud, very rarely. But in our hearts, have we banked enough points at this given moment where we don't need to spend more time with Jesus? Our My credit's pretty good right now. My reputation or my involvement with certain things equals that. Isn't that settling for nearness instead of actually rising to knowing him?

Maybe it's on doing the right things externally while hidden things internally are going another way. We talked about that last time. Here's where I want us to be thinking. There is good news at the end of this cautionary tale that clarifies and instructs and invites. The good news is that Jesus receives people who come to him honestly. He heals that which is fractured within us. In James 4: 8, it says that he draws near to those who draw near to him.

And so as we close today, I want you to hear this clearly. Jesus is not asking you or I to get better at proximity. In some ways, simply by your being here, it indicates you might be good at that. Jesus is not asking you to get better at proximity. He's inviting you into relationship. I know you know that. I'm not giving you something completely novel that you've never experienced or thought of before. It's not a eureka moment. It's not. But he's inviting you, and he does it new every day. He's inviting you into relationship. He already knows the places where you might be drifting, where you might be numb, where you've settled for nearness without surrender. And he will meet you there. He does meet us there, not with shame, again, but with an invitation. Because those are human realities, the realities of drifting, the realities of becoming numb from time to time. Our being fickle and finite means that we will have these things in this life, but our response to them is what is important. That's one of the gifts of our being in community together, is being able to respond to that with and to one another.

My encourage this morning for us is, don't give God your noise. I want us to consider what it means for us to give him our heart. I don't want us to settle for being around God or being around the things of God. I want us to come to know him. Philippians 3: 10, that I may know him in the power of the gospel work. It's a paraphrase, but that's the goal of our lives. Because proximity may sound good. It may impress people. It may win you favor in one way or the other. But only that relationship with God is what can transform us. If we want to be a part of a community, inwardly, as we edify encourage one another or outwardly as we go to serve, if we want to be a community that is transformative, that is ourselves changing, focusing on our sanctification, growing in the ways of Christ and of his truth and his word, we need to go through that inner transformation to see that outward change. Proximity may impress, but only relationship transforms us. Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for your word. We thank you for all that is within it.

Lord, these stories, these cautionary tales that we can read and know and understand and learn from, Lord. God, we think on all of those stories in relationship with our own experiences. God, I pray that you would just use some of these stories today to stir up within us questions of ourselves. Lord, I pray that for myself, for all of us in this room, we would not be a people who do not evaluate and reflect upon the life that we are living. Lord, I pray that as we seek to encourage and journey alongside of one another, that we would be a people who practice confession of sins, that we'd be a people who practice forgiveness, that we'd be a people who practice returning to you amidst uncertainty and amongst difficult things. Lord, I pray where there is drift, where there is spiritual numbness. I pray that you would help us to acknowledge those things. I pray that you would help us to name them. And Lord, I pray that you would just raise that you would raise up your church, that you would raise up Scripture and encouragement in our lives to respond to those things rightly and to put them in their place.

Lord, I pray that for all of us as a Cairn community, you would not stir us up to become fans of you and your word, that you would not stir us up to become just simply familiar with you and your word, but rather that we would take great joy in being in an intimate relationship with you, Lord. I pray that you would use that to change us, and you would use that to change our community. We pray these things in your name. Amen.