

FEAR – FAMILY – FAITH 4

“Fear of Failure”

Then the servant with the one bag of silver came and said, ‘Master, I knew you were a harsh man, harvesting crops you didn’t plant and gathering crops you didn’t cultivate. I was afraid I would lose your money, so I hid it in the earth. Look, here is your money back.’ Matthew 25:24-25

In the Parable of the Talents we read of this unfaithful fearful steward burying his master’s treasure in the ground...and paying the price for it! He is sent into that far away place of weeping and gnashing of teeth. We might be tempted to think his fiscal strategy might not be such a bad idea in our present economy...but apparently our Master doesn’t agree!

It wasn’t his financial planning that cost him his standing with his master...it was his fear of failure. It is the same for us I’m afraid. Failure is not the subject...fear of failure is. All of us fail, but not all of us live with the fear of failure. But, and this is the reason for this sermon; most of us human beings have a paralyzing fear of failure.

There is an interesting development that caught popularity in the 1990’s. It was to toy with the words, and begin describing the Fear of Failure as really a fear of success. Since the 90’s (and until just recently) we’ve seen many self-help gurus and management experts, and motivational speakers picking up on this ‘cool-catch-phrase’ and cashing in on discussing the Fear of Success. I want to address these two questions: This week we’ll talk about Overcoming the Fear of Failure, and next week we’ll discuss, Understanding the Fear of Success. First, today:

Overcoming the Fear of Failure:

1. ACKNOWLEDGE OUR FAILURES

*Indeed, we all make many mistakes. James 3:2
For everyone has sinned; we all fall short of God’s glorious standard. Rom. 3:23*

Maybe it does, or maybe it doesn't, help you...but we are all failures in so many different ways. How many of you rode your bike on the first try? How many of you are still working your very first job? How many of you have progressed up the spiritual ladder one step at a time from the moment of your conversion until now? To overcome our fear of failure we must first acknowledge that we have failed!

I know this fact is humbling for some of us, but denying our failures seems a sure way to repeat them. The important thing to remember is that failure is a fact of life, not a way of life. All of us have failed at something, sometime, yet not all of us have chosen to be frozen by that fact! Many, in fact most of us have learned to move past our past failures, and have regained some semblance of order and stability to our lives, inspite of our failures.

2. ACCEPT GOD'S FORGIVENESS

...Yet God, with undeserved kindness, declares that we are righteous. He did this through Christ Jesus when he freed us from the penalty for our sins. Romans 3:23

This verse is a continuation of the scripture under point 1. Yes, we've all fallen short, "failed" to be all God's called us to be...but God has made forgiveness possible by sending Jesus to die for us.

The rub is not that forgiveness is available; it's that it must be accepted. It doesn't do any of us any good to "know" that Jesus died on a cross to save us from our sins and failures...if we continually choose to refuse to accept what that death made possible. Many are the hard-hearted, prideful, self-righteous fools (that's God's word, not mine) that refuse to admit their sinful failure, and reject God's offer of forgiveness. I'm deeply troubled by the attitude that says: "I don't need to be forgiven." What? How exactly do you think that person will get to heaven?

It is important to remember in this context of discussing our fears of failure and success; that our forgiveness is in no way dependent on our success! We don't have to clean up our act first to make God love us and want to forgive us.

In fact the opposite is true. God is repulsed by our vain attempts to make ourselves worthy to receive His forgiveness. We need rather to come just as we are; and humbly receive God's offer of forgiveness. It will help us deal with our failures to know that God stands ready, willing and ABLE to forgive us when we are ready to accept that forgiveness.

3. APPLY THE LESSONS OF FAILURE

So be truly glad. There is wonderful joy ahead, even though you have to endure many trials for a little while. These trials will show that your faith is genuine. It is being tested as fire tests and purifies gold – though your faith is far more precious than mere gold. So when your faith remains strong through many trials, it will bring you much praise and glory and honor on the day when Jesus Christ is revealed to the whole world.
1 Peter 1:6-7

It might help us overcome our fear of failure to realize that every failure is nothing more than a learning opportunity, a teachable moment, a test of our knowledge (and faith.) What would it do for you to consider, thoughtfully consider every mistake you've made, every failure you've experienced, every trial or test you've endured...as part of God's plan to make of you what God alone knows to be the best for you? I'm not saying that God causes bad things to happen to good people, but when they do happen...God is right there seeking to redeem the "bad" and make it good. How else can Paul claim: *"And we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them"?*

The harder part (than simply blaming every bad circumstance on God) is to use the difficult experiences of life to create a filter for us to use to judge and learn and grow from each experience this life brings. I would never advocate making mistakes or failures on purpose, but I'm also not of the opinion that mistakes or failures are always such a bad thing. Do you remember years ago we tried to have Wed evening services outside on the lawn? They didn't work. But from that experience we began creating what has now become our very successful Wed. evening program called FOCUS. I think that can happen in our lives too.

The late novelist, John Gardner said: "One of the reasons why mature people stop growing and learning is that they become less and less willing to risk failure." We must take the failures of our past and make them help us avoid them in the future, but also see how God is using them to make us more like His son, Jesus.

4. ARISE FROM FAILURE AND START AGAIN

The godly may trip seven times, but they will get up again. But one disaster is enough to overthrow the wicked. Proverbs 24:16

We lost a famous newsman 2 weeks ago; Paul Harvey. Someone once asked Paul Harvey, the journalist and radio commentator, to reveal the secret of his success. He simply remarked; "I get up when I fall down." That might be the secret for us too. We are going to fail, but with Christ at our side, and in our heart...how can we stay down. We may (will) get knocked down, but as long as Jesus is living in us, we'll never be knocked out!

I know the fits and starts that mark my spiritual life are most embarrassing to me, and I'm afraid, also to my Master; but I don't know what else to offer you. When you fail, when you sin, when you fall down...get up and start again! I believe that to be one distinguishable mark of a follower of Jesus.

Peter is my greatest example. The impetuous disciple; speaking for the group, weakly and momentarily walking on the water, chopping off the soldiers ear, denying Jesus 3 times. Yet each time he failed, he arose to start again. Then it happened...he was asked by Jesus 3 times (coincidence) if he loved Him. 3 times he tried to assure Jesus he did, and then the Holy Spirit invaded him and from that moment on, he became (along with Paul) the greatest force the Kingdom of God has ever seen. From the ashes of our failure arises the new growth of our faithfulness...it's up to us. It's up to us to get up and become what God wants to make of us.

When James Garfield (later President of the U.S.) was principal of Hiram College in Ohio, a father asked him if the course of study could be simplified so that his son might be able to go through by a shorter route. "Certainly," Garfield replied. "But it all depends on what you want to make of your boy. When God wants to make an oak tree, He takes a hundred years. When He wants to make a squash he requires only two months." It's up to us to arise and become what God wants to make of us.

I want to close this morning by asking a question. When you look in the mirror in the morning what do you see? Do you see a gorgeous success or a miserable failure... or something in between? Do you see nothing but a composite of all your shortcomings, is all you see a divorced person, or a moral failure, or an overweight loser, or someone who can't keep a job, a washed up worthless retiree? Now let me ask you another question.

Can you imagine a loving father out in public with his grown daughter meeting a new friend saying; "Hi new friend, this is my daughter Hazel. She spilled grape juice on the carpet when she was 2, she wet the bed till she was 4, she scratched the car with her bike when she was 9. She never had a date in middle school; she failed to get on the honor roll one time in all 4 years of high school. She dropped out of college; she's been married twice and has had 4 speeding tickets."

Loving fathers don't memorize their children's mistakes...neither does our Heavenly Father. Neither should we. If you are beating yourself up over the mistakes or failures of your past, then you'll have no choice but to continue to live in fear of more and future failures. If you are beating yourself up for the memories of past mistakes... you are holding yourself to a higher standard that God is...which makes you what?

It's time to acknowledge our failures, accept God's forgiveness for our failures, learn from our failures and arise and move beyond our failures. Doing those things will help us overcome the Fear of Failure.

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Overcoming the Fear of Failure:

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Action Steps:
for Overcoming our Fear of Failure.

Sometime this week try to do one or a few or all of these 'action steps'.

1. Make a list of all the Failures you have experienced in your life. Begin with the obvious and major ones, and go as far as you want to go. Spend some time prayerfully considering how or why you consider them failures, and what actions you took that caused them to be failures. Maybe even consider how you could have done something different to keep them from being or becoming failures.
2. Go through the list and see which ones have been forgiven, and which may not have been. Ask God to specifically forgive you for each failure you have listed.
3. Think of others who may have contributed to these failures, and seek them out and offer God's forgiveness, and your own for their part in your/their failures.
4. Make a list of the things you have learned from these past experiences of failure. Try to include how these learning's happened, and how they might still be impacting your life today. Share with someone you trust the one major thing you have learned from one major failure you have experienced.
5. What things in your life might become failures right now? Consider, (maybe with that trusted friend/spouse) what God might want to teach you from this current experience, and how you might make sure you learn that lesson.
6. If you are living in a failure, develop your own action plan to "Get up". What must you do today, tomorrow, the next day to make sure that after having fallen, you "Get up"?