

Lake Cities Community Church
June 21, 2009
Series: On Your Mark!
Pastor Craig Schill

“Real Failure”
Mark 9:14-29

School is out and here are my kid’s report cards. Let’s just take a look, shall we? Let’s begin with Trevor’s grades... I’m just kidding – in seminary they told us not to embarrass your kids in your sermon illustrations. Not that they would be embarrassed –their grades are really good. But doesn’t that bring back some memories – bringing home the report card? Do you remember the old letter grade system? A – B – C – D and what F? To my knowledge the only one of those letters actually stood for an actual word was “F” which means what? “Failed.” If you get an “F” you have failed the class. Now I can’t imagine in this intelligent looking congregation any of you ever came close to failing a class...

But I did. My second year in college I brought home an “F” – in my calculus class. I failed the class. My roommate Tom and I both failed together. It was an 8:00 class, and when the alarm would go off at 7:45 - I would look over and see Tom still sleeping and say, “If Tom is not going to class, then I am not going.” And I found out later, he was thinking the same thing. A person might fail a class because of a poor teacher, or difficult material. I failed my class because I was lazy. I procrastinated and skipped class too many times. I am ashamed of my failure. I regret the poor decisions I made at that time in my life.

I noted this past week on my Facebook page that I was doing a sermon on failure, and it sparked a great deal of debate. How do you define failure? A cousin of mine argued failure is “only the successful discovery of what does not work.” And that is a type of failure

– for example Thomas Edison “failed” hundreds of times before finding the right filament for the light bulb. That type of failure is commendable.

But there is nothing commendable about being lazy. There is no glory in sin – and that is the type of failure we are looking at this morning. Real failure. Cain experienced real failure when his jealousy caused him to murder his brother. David experienced real failure when his lust found a married woman. Jonah experienced real failure when God’s compassion caused him to become bitter. Moses experienced real failure when he disregarded God’s command and hit the rock instead of speaking to it – causing him to miss out on the Promised Land.

Maybe you have never failed a class - but maybe you have failed God. Maybe you have experience failure in your marriage; as a parent or in ministry. If you have ever fallen into temptation, if you have ever been puffed up with pride, broken promises. If you have ever made a mess of things – then this sermon on failure is designed for you.

Take your Bibles out and turn with me to Mark chapter 9. We are in verses 14-29. As you turn there, let me go ahead and reveal my point. Though there is nothing commendable about failure, we can **“Redeem failure, by learning from it.”** God can strengthen us through failure if we will learn the lessons he wants us to learn. And so as we look at our text we will see ten lessons about failure.

10 FACTS about FAILURE

Let’s begin in verse 14. *When they came back to the disciples, they saw a large crowd around them, and some scribes arguing with them.* You will recall that Peter, James and John are returning from a tremendous mountain top experience. They have seen the

transfiguration of Jesus, beheld his glory and laid their eyes on Moses and Elijah. And as they are descending the mountain that glory is replaced by the sound of arguing and angry words. As the scene comes into focus, they see a large crowd; smug looking Scribes with their noses in the air, disappointed townspeople looking confused and nine disciples clearly on the defensive.

From this one verse, we have our first two lessons about failure: **(1) Failure can lead to fighting.** The disciples have failed in casting out a demon and this leads directly to this scene at hand. When we fail at something we become frustrated, angry, our pride is bruised – the perfect storm to escalate the situation. If you have failed, be careful not to let that failure breed more failure and destruction. That is the natural course.

The second lesson is that **(2) your enemies delight in your failure.** No one is more pleased at the disciples' failure than the Scribes. In the past, to their dismay, Jesus' message has been validated by his casting out demons (1:27-28). With this failure, in their eyes, Jesus' ministry has been discredited. And so you and I should remember that Satan and our earthly enemies are waiting in the wings, ready to exploit our failure to their advantage.

Let's continue – verse 15: **Mark 9:15 Immediately, when the entire crowd saw Him, they were amazed and began running up to greet Him.** As soon as Jesus enters the story, everything changes. The arguing stops and the crowd flocks to him. They are amazed at Jesus. Some think that an afterglow of the transfiguration is visible, but that is unlikely. Jesus represents hope and a solution to the problem. That leads to our third lesson about failure **(3)“After you fail... run to Jesus.”** It is interesting to note that often in the gospels - when the disciples are away from Jesus – that is when they fail; but when they are with

Jesus – they have victory. Jesus is asleep – the disciples panic. Jesus sends the disciples in the boat by themselves – they get into trouble. For you and I, when we fail – fall into sin – our direction ought not to be fighting – but running back to Jesus.

Mark 9:16 And He asked them, “What are you discussing with them?” He probably addressing the Scribes, but they do not have a chance to answer. Mark 9:17 And one of the crowd answered Him, “Teacher, I brought You my son, possessed with a spirit which makes him mute; Mark 9:18 and whenever it seizes him, it slams him *to the ground* and he foams *at the mouth*, and grinds his teeth and stiffens out. I told Your disciples to cast it out, and they could not *do it*.”

In Mark chapter three we learned that the disciples had two jobs; to preach and to cast our demons. They had been trained to do both. They were not longer rookies and had perhaps cast out dozens or hundreds of demons by this point. They were ghost busters of the 1st century. And from this we take note that **(4) failure often follows success**. When things are going well – when we have a few skins on the wall, and some experience under our belt – that is the time to be most careful. Because in success we become prideful and begin to trust in our own devices – and pride comes before the fall.

I’d like to make one more point before we get to verse 19. In verse 17 we have what must be the most interesting line in the story, “**Teacher, I brought You my son.**” The Greek is second person singular – “I brought my son to you!” How could he say this? Wasn’t Jesus up on the mountain? Wasn’t he out of the office? Shouldn’t Jesus correct the man and say, “Friend, you did not bring me your son – you brought him to these disciples of mine.” He didn’t do that – he took responsibilities. The fifth lesson on failure is that **(5) Leaders take**

responsibility for subordinate's failures. When you enter into leadership you quickly realize that like it or not, you have responsibility for those underneath you. Parents ought to take responsibility for their children's' mistakes. If a child breaks a neighbor's window – that is ultimately the parent's responsibility. A small business owner is responsible for what the front desk clerk says or does – and so it is with church leaders. And as a leader when those under you, fail you, it can be very frustrating – verse 19:

Mark 9:19 **And He answered them** (I believe he is reference the disciples) **and said,** **“O unbelieving generation, how long shall I be with you? How long shall I put up with you?”** Garland states, “Jesus does not wish to be rid of his inept disciples but refers to how little time he has left to soften their hardheartedness...time is short (355).” It is of great encouragement to me that Jesus could be frustrated and yet without sin. But from the disciples perspective what we learn about failure is; when you fail, **(6) accept the rebuke.** When you mess-up, be prepared to take your lumps and the consequences that come from that failure. Don't try to avoid them. Proverbs says: **A wise son accepts his father's discipline, but a scoffer does not listen to rebuke** (Prov 13:1).

And so Jesus says, **“Bring him to Me!”** Mark 9:20 **They brought the boy to Him.** **When he saw Him, immediately the spirit threw him into a convulsion, and falling to the ground, he began rolling around and foaming at the mouth.** The demon causes epileptic seizures. Mark 9:21 **And He asked his father, “How long has this been happening to him?”** **And he said, “From childhood.** Mark 9:22 **“It has often thrown him both into the fire and into the water to destroy him. But if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us!”**

The story is tragic not only in the demon's destruction, but in the lack of faith. The crowd and disciples don't believe. The man is hedging his bets by questioning whether Jesus can help – so Jesus continues with another (mild) rebuke, [Mark 9:23](#) And Jesus said to him, “If You can? All things are possible to him who believes.” The man speaks for most of us saying: [Mark 9:24](#) Immediately the boy's father cried out and said, “I do believe; help my unbelief.” Lesson **(7) Failure is caused by a lack of faith in Jesus.** This might sound contradictory to what I just said – but the issue was not a lack of faith. The disciples started with plenty of faith that they could handle the situation; and the man had enough faith in the disciples to bring his son to them. The problem was not a lack of faith – but a lack of faith, in Jesus. Those two words are the key. A.W. Tozer liked to say: “faith in faith is faith astray.” We fail because we put our faith in ourselves, our talents and abilities. Especially after a period of success. Failure teaches us that our faith should only be in one person – Jesus.

[Mark 9:25](#) When Jesus saw that a crowd was rapidly gathering, He rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, “You deaf and mute spirit, I command you, come out of him and do not enter him again.” [Mark 9:26](#) After crying out and throwing him into terrible convulsions, it came out; and *the boy* became so much like a corpse that most of *them* said, “He is dead!” [Mark 9:27](#) But Jesus took him by the hand and raised him; and he got up. I love this next lesson. **(8) Our failure does not stop God's work.** You can't mess up so badly that God can't come in and fix things up. When we fail, God does not wash His hands of us and leave us twisting in the wind. Jesus has compassion on the boy and takes responsibility for his followers – and brings victory out of defeat.

Mark 9:28 When He came into *the* house, His disciples *began* questioning Him privately, “Why could we not drive it out?” **(9) “After you fail – ask questions.”** At least the disciples had the wisdom to take the initiative, as the proper time, when they are back in the house to begin to debrief about what happened. Failure should be followed by a period of debriefing. Why didn’t this work? Why did my marriage fail? How did we get so far in debt? Ask questions. Get godly counsel. Search the Scriptures.

Mark 9:29 And He said to them, “This kind cannot come out by anything but prayer.” Our last lesson is **(10) we fail because we don’t pray.** Prayer at the core is a sign of dependence on God. When we pray we recognize that we need Him to help us. When we don’t pray, whether we realize it or not, we are saying that we think we can handle things ourselves. Pastor Andrew Murray wrote powerfully on the sin of prayerlessness, “The sin of prayerlessness is the cause of a deficient spiritual life. It is a proof that, for the most part, our life is still under the power of the flesh. Prayer is the pulse of life; by it the doctor can tell what is the condition of the heart” (Murry, 18).

Summary

We can redeem failure if we learn from it. And this morning we have had a case study in how to do just that. First remember that failure can lead to fighting – be careful not to be drawn into bickering by your own frustrations. Second, be aware that your enemies are waiting in the wings for you to fail, including Satan who looks for every opportunity to discredit the message of God. Third, after you have a failure – though it may seem like the last thing you want to do – run to Jesus. Go back to him. Ask for forgiveness, ask for help. Fourth, the timing of failure is often after success – be aware of that. Fifth, take

responsibility for the failure of those under your responsibility. Six, when you fail take the rebuke – there are consequences to sin. Seventh, keep your trust in Jesus – don't trust in your own gifts or strength. Eighth, it is encouraging to remember in the midst of a failure – that God's power will continue to work. You didn't ruin everything. Ninth, after you fail ask questions. And finally – don't forget, Christian, to pray and thereby recognize your dependency on God.

Application

As we consider application, my goal is that you would redeem failure by learning from it – by taking and applying one or more of our 10 lessons to your life this week. Or if you have a friend going through a period of failure and hardship, maybe you could share this message with her or him. The disciple's failures in Scripture were preserved to be an example to us as we attempt to also follow Jesus.

Also, last week our text ended with a challenge to “listen to Jesus” – and I challenged you to read your Bible for one hour. Did you do that? The end of our text this week challenges us to pray and recognize our dependency on God. And so I challenge you to spend one hour in prayer this week. Through the word we listen to God. Through prayer we acknowledge our dependence on Him.

Conclusion

The “F” I received in college was a wake-up call for me. That was not a road I wanted to continue going down. So, I accepted a rebuke from my parents who had paid for that class I failed. I asked and answered the question, “How did this happen?” I changed

roommates and began to adopt good study habits. I went in and sought help from my professors. I became good student and went on to graduate school and seminary, graduating from both programs with honors. I believe that that failure was redeemed because I learned my lessons from it. And I pray that you too would learn whatever lessons God is teaching you – so that your failure would be redeemed into area of strength and spiritual victory.