

Greater Than: Failure

Message #3 in the series "Greater Than"

John 14:12; Matthew 26:69-75; John 21:15-19

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Very truly I tell you, whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father.
John 14:12

Have you ever messed up? I mean really messed up so bad that your failure was absolutely unavoidable? I have. Oh, how I have really messed up so many times...

I'm here visiting a farm today because one of my favorite failure stories comes from my time working on the farm with my Grandpa Bob. I was nine years old, and, when I think back on it with adult eyes, I wonder how exactly Grandpa kept me busy. There are only so many jobs a nine-year-old can do on the farm after all. I can remember being the "go-fer" in several situations. Grandpa would be working on a tractor, or another piece of farm equipment and he'd say, "Matt run to the shed and bring me a 7/16^{ths} wrench." I was the go-fer. When a highly mechanical job was being done, I was the expendable one who could leave the scene and go for the needed tools or supplies.

Another exciting job I had on the farm was gate opener and closer. When rolling out to the pasture to count cows or perform some other important task, someone needed to get out of the truck to open the gate, let the truck roll through and then shut the gate. This was an important job and because I wasn't the one driving the truck, I was responsible for the gate. It made me wonder how Grandpa worked the gates when I wasn't in the truck with him.

One other job that I had that wasn't very exciting at all was fuel technician. To save time and resources, Grandpa had a diesel tank with a pump installed in the back of an old pickup truck that he could move out to the field where he was working and refuel the machinery on the spot. This saved countless hours of driving back and forth from the field just to get a fill up. And, as luck would have it, because I was nine and there is little more for a nine-year-old to do on the farm, filling up this large portable gas tank was my job.

As I started filling the portable tank, Grandpa handed me a small stick. He said that if I held this stick in the opening of the tank and the diesel was touching the stick, I was done. So, Grandpa left me to fill the tank, stick in hand. I disliked this job. It was boring and I was ready to be done as soon as possible. I would stop and check

the stick every minute or so, but it didn't seem that like big tank was filling up at all. I'd stop and really stretch my small hand down into the opening of the tank with that stick just to see if I could get it to touch the gas until... the stick slipped out of my hand.

My heart fell to the bottom of my feet and back up again. I had really done it now. I'd lost the stick inside the diesel tank and I was sure there was no way to get it out. I didn't know what to do, so I just kept on filling the tank. Grandpa came by a little later and said, "Did it touch the stick yet?" And I had to tell him what had happened. I was devastated.

We all make mistakes.

Are you like me in noticing that our culture has become averse to making mistakes? It's as if we are so petrified of failing that we throw ourselves into absolute fits of denial when we fail. Or, and this is even worse, we chronically blame others for our mistakes. I wonder if we all can just agree that it is OK to fail. It's OK. It going to happen someday. No perfect streak lasts forever.

In fact, **Ecclesiastes 7:20** says, *"There is no one on earth who is righteous, no one who does that which is right and never sins."*

No one.

No one is perfect.

We are in the middle of a message series here at St. Paul's we are calling "Greater Than." And we believe that God is calling us not to something bigger, but he is calling us to something greater. This greater than life can lead to a greater sense of purpose and belonging. It is where God may be shaping us and forming us to a new calling. And, as we have discussed these past two weeks, there are things that the human mind and spirit will do when God is nudging us and calling us to follow him more closely. These past two weeks we've examined how we are:

Greater than comparisons.

It is hard to compare when you are not focusing on yourself.

We also saw last week that we are:

Greater than limitations, particularly the limitations that we put on ourselves and God. Our limits are not God's limits. God has no limits.

This week we are going to look at how we are in fact **greater than failure**. Now, as we have seen throughout the Bible story in this message series, the Bible is full of normal people. People like you and me who have similar foibles and flops throughout the text. If you ever feel like a failure and you'd like to dwell in your failure with some good company, do a little web search for Biblical failures. You'll see that failure is a common, biblical occurrence.

You can even start at the very beginning. Adam and Eve had one job. Don't eat from one particular tree in the garden. They were permitted to eat everything else in the garden, but what did they do? They ate from that one tree.

The Israelites were just freed from generations of captivity in Egypt. God delivered them by parting the Red Sea so they could evade their captors. They had just witnessed a tremendous miracle. Then, while God and Moses went up to the mountain to hammer out the 10 commandments, what did the Israelites do? They melted down all their gold and made a new idol to worship. Or, how about King David? David felt it necessary to take another man's wife and then cover it up by sending her husband to the front battle lines. Around every corner of the Biblical text is someone making a mistake—failing.

While sin and brokenness are present today just as sin and brokenness was present in these stories of so long ago, **God redeems everything, even our failure.**

Late in the Gospel account of Matthew, right before Jesus is arrested, he tells his disciples that he, the shepherd, will be struck and the disciples, the shepherd's sheep, will be scattered. You can imagine how crazy this would sound to the guys who had been the closest to Jesus. They had left everything behind—their jobs, their families, everything that was normal to them—to follow Jesus. During their time together Jesus performed miracles; they had performed miracles too. Jesus looks at all of them in this moment and is prophetically preparing them for what is coming, and the disciples are rightfully confused.

Peter, one of Jesus's closet friends, says, *"I will never fall away."*

Jesus, perhaps wanting to put a finer point on his message to his disciples, looks to Peter and says, **(Matthew 26:34) "Truly, I say to you, this very night, before the cock crows, you will deny me three times."**

Here is Peter, the most zealous disciple, hearing that soon Jesus will be taken and that everyone in Jesus's circle will flee, he responds perhaps the way we would expect him to. As if to say, "All these other guys might run and hide, but I won't." To which Jesus replies with an oddly specific illustration of what Peter's future mistake, his impending failure, will look like. Jesus looks at the most confident disciple in this moment and says—effectively—"You won't just fail once. You will fail three times in a matter of moments in only few hours from now."

This story really punches me in the chest when I think about how this must have sounded to Peter. I don't know if this is true or not, but I imagine Peter didn't know what to do with this news. Maybe it bothered him a little that Jesus would say this to him; maybe Peter ignored the warning. We know that a few verses later in Matthew when Jesus is praying at Gethsemane the disciples fall asleep. So, maybe this is an indication that Peter wasn't too broken up over Jesus's prophetic assessment of his future performance.

But, when Jesus is taken before Caiaphas to be judged, Peter follows him into the courtyard. This would have taken some real courage. He would have been exhausted, and maybe he had that semi-out-of-body feeling we have when we are physically tired and mentally spent in times of crisis and chaos. There's a large crowd gathering, and the whole ordeal is probably disorienting.

Peter is caught off-guard. A maid approaches him and says,

"You also were with Jesus of Galilee," she said.

⁷⁰ But he denied it before them all. "I don't know what you're talking about," he said.

⁷¹ Then he went out to the gateway, where another servant girl saw him and said to the people there, "This fellow was with Jesus of Nazareth."

⁷² He denied it again, with an oath: "I don't know the man!"

⁷³ After a little while, those standing there went up to Peter and said, "Surely you are one of them; your accent gives you away."

⁷⁴ Then he began to call down curses, and he swore to them, "I don't know the man!"

Immediately a rooster crowed. ⁷⁵ Then Peter remembered the word Jesus had spoken: "Before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times." And he went outside and wept bitterly. (Matthew 26:69-75)

You can probably guess how Peter felt. He was the one who proclaimed to Jesus that he would be the one left standing; he would not scatter. And yet, mere moments after Jesus is captured, when the shepherd is struck, he falters not once, but three times.

As I was reading this story over and over in preparing this message I stopped every time at the final word "bitterly." In the original Greek the word that means bitterly in this passage is pronounced **pik-ros** and it doesn't just mean "bitterly." It can also mean "violently" and "with great remorse." And I think that is heavy because failure often brings remorse. We avoid taking chances not because we think we will fail, but we would rather avoid the remorse we will experience *if* we fail.

It is very normal to feel remorse after failure, but the caution here is that we cannot let our failure define us—we can't let it continue to live on longer than it should. If unchecked, failure can spin so wildly out of control that we begin to feel deep and almost irrational remorse for even the smallest mistakes that we make. We adopt this ultra-perfectionism as an insulation from the pain we don't want to feel associated with failure.

Remember, God redeems everything, even our failure. If we are afraid of failing, we need to remember that nothing happens outside of God's lordship over our lives and through his grace and peace he redeems everything.

Let's all agree that we need to stop chasing perfection. God is perfect. Jesus, he is perfect, we are not. In my house we've been working on celebrating when we fail. That's right, we are trying to normalize failure but putting aside futile pursuits of

perfectionism. Whenever we fail, we simply say “ta-da.” Try that with me. That’s right. Because when we can say “ta-da” when we fail, we are celebrating the lessons we learn from our failure and using that moment to build resilience and reliance on God. Everything that anyone has comes from God and he can shape every opportunity to magnify his glory.

That day so long ago on the farm when I dropped a small measuring stick into the diesel tank, I remember my grandpa grumbling a little as he jumped up into the pickup bed with me to assess the situation. Realizing he couldn’t see anything in the dark tank, he laughed a little and just finished filling up the tank. I was expecting him to really let me have it. Who knows what damage debris like that in a fuel tank could cause. Instead, we just moved on with the rest of the day’s chores.

By doing the unexpected thing, I know, in my heart, that I became closer to my grandpa on that day. This was but a small change in our relationship but 32 years later this is one of the clearest stories I can recall of our time together.

In his remorse, Peter probably didn’t expect what would happen next in his life with Jesus. I mean the weight of his failure probably stayed with him, and he may have wondered what it meant that he denied Jesus three times, just as Jesus said he would. In one of several accounts of Jesus appearing to his disciples after his resurrection, Peter and Jesus have this conversation that we see later in John’s Gospel. Peter was probably expecting a rebuke or something like that, but something else happens instead. Now, for context, remember that Peter’s full name was Simon Peter. We pick up this story after Jesus has made breakfast for Peter and other disciples.

***Jesus said to Simon Peter,
“Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?”
“Yes, Lord,” he said, “you know that I love you.”
Jesus said, “Feed my lambs.”
¹⁶ Again Jesus said, “Simon son of John, do you love me?”
He answered, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.”
Jesus said, “Take care of my sheep.”
¹⁷ The third time he said to him,
“Simon son of John, do you love me?”
Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, “Do you love me?” He said, “Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you.”
Jesus said, “Feed my sheep. (John 21:15-17)***

In what was their first private conversation following the three times Peter had denied him, Jesus asks Peter three times, “Do you love me.” For every time he had denied Jesus, Peter was given an opportunity to tell Jesus emphatically that he loved him. With each question and then each affirmation, Jesus gives specific directions to Peter—to feed Jesus’s lambs, to take care of his sheep, to feed his sheep. It was as if the shepherd was handing over the staff and the responsibility to Peter.

Jesus knew Peter would deny him. It happened just as Jesus said it would. However, Peter had been refined through his failure. In remorse, he cried bitterly. And, when he was given the opportunity to see Jesus again, we see that he was overwhelmed. He knew that Jesus had redeemed even his greatest failure so that he could move forward — caring for Jesus's many, many sheep. In this way Peter saw he was greater than his failure.

**You are greater than failure.
God sees something greater in you than your failure.**

Whatever you have done; no matter how unbelievably harmful or destructive, you have been redeemed.

God can redeem anything, even our failure.

The burden of remorse is often quite heavy. When we can turn our hearts to God and lay at his feet the disappointment and remorse that failure often brings, when we can surrender to God the perfectionism that overwhelms us, we are reminded that he loves us and sees something greater in all of us.

**You are greater than failure,
because God's grace, love and peace are greater.**