

Who Am I? At the Intersection of Failure and Identity

Let's open our Bibles to Luke 22. We are in a series called *Who Am I? Finding Our Identity in Christ* and I thought that I was going to be sharing a message on integrity and walking in the light, but near the end of the week, as it occurred to me that this is a holiday weekend and typically that means a lot of people traveling and not here, I felt a nudge from the Lord to hold off on that message until next week. But that meant I didn't have the time to prepare an entirely new message so I've reworked a message that I preached a couple years ago about a topic that hits pretty close to home when it comes to our identity. This morning we're going to look at the intersection of failure and identity. So some of you who have been here a little while may feel like this sermon is familiar, but I pray that we all hear it with new ears cause I really believe that God wants to speak to our hearts in a fresh way. Let's go to God in prayer.

Failure is a part of the human condition and that doesn't stop when we become Christians. There was a local Word of Faith pastor on Long Island who used to end his radio program with the words, "You fail? Impossible!" I disagree with him: not only is failure possible, it's actually quite necessary. If we ever attempt anything of significance in our lives, we are going to fail. Winston Churchill once said, "Success is not **final**, **failure** is not fatal: it is the courage to continue that counts." If we spend all our lives trying to avoid failure that in itself will be a kind of failure. I don't like to fail, I don't want to fail, but the truth is, I need to fail. And so do you. It's a part of living, and God can use failure to do a good work in our lives. The problem with failure is when it begins to intertwine with our identity and we begin to identify ourselves as failures. We begin to see failure, not as something we *do*, but as something we *are*.

Now failure is a broad word and the truth is failure comes in many shapes and sizes. Failure can take the shape of the relatively minor social embarrassment of saying or doing the wrong thing (something I have quite a bit of experience in), or it can look like failing to meet expectations, either our own expectations or the expectations of others or both. Or it can be the devastation of a vocational failure, a failed marriage, or a moral failure. I talked to one man whose adult son wouldn't see him or even talk to him because of ways he had hurt him. For years he tried to reach out to him but every attempt was rejected. This man lived with the deep pain regret of knowing he had failed his son as a parent.

Failure not only comes in different shapes and sizes, it affects us all differently and it can intersect with our identity in different ways. Don't think that failure is only an issue to the person who is obviously messing up. There's a demotivational poster that shows a man running a hurdling race and behind him there's a trail of knocked over hurdles and the caption reads, "Failure: you'll know it when you see it." But that's not always true. Many people who appear very successful are running the race scared to death of failing. They may not knock the hurdles over, but they can't stop running for fear that failure will catch up to them. The driving force behind many people who are driven to succeed is a fear of failure. Failure to them is more than something that they might do, or that might happen to them. In their minds to fail ever is to *be* a failure, and so they run and jump and run and jump.

For that reason I'm grateful that the Bible doesn't airbrush the failure even of its greatest characters. With brutal honesty it records the failings of many of the men and women God chose to use and this morning I want us to consider the failure of the Apostle Peter. Let's read **Luke 22:31-34, 54-62** together.

Many of Peter's failures were captured in scripture. There was the time he stepped out of the boat and

began to walk on water, until he took his eyes off Jesus and put them on the wind and waves and began to sink. I actually don't see this as a failure - I see this as Peter taking a step and a risk that none of the other disciples were willing to take. He *asked* Jesus to command him to come to him, and then he got out of the boat and began to walk on water. As one who likes to sit in the safety of the boat, it's hard for me to be too hard on Peter for failing to keep his eyes on Jesus when surrounded by the wind and waves. But in the end, his faith did fail and he had to call out to Jesus to save him.

Then there was the time when Peter rebuked Jesus for saying that he must go to Jerusalem and be crucified. It's never really advisable to rebuke God. This was "saying the wrong thing at the wrong time" on steroids because it's not just that Peter said a dumb thing, he said a Satanic thing and Jesus openly rebuked him by saying, "Get behind me Satan!" It was a humiliating moment for Peter, made all the more humiliating because all the other disciples witnessed his failure .

But the failure we read about in Luke 22 has got to be the failure that hurt the most for Peter. Only a few hours earlier he had bragged about how he would die for Jesus, but as Jesus is being tried, Peter's courage fails and three times he denies even knowing Jesus. Most painful of all, his loyalty to the man he loved the most failed as he not only denied Jesus, he disowned him with a curse.

Peter goes out and weeps bitterly and to Peter at that moment, it has to feel like failure is going to be the last word on his life. The next several days will be the darkest days of his life as Satan sifts his soul over and over with accusations that pierce his heart and rake his emotions over the hot beds of his own sense of failure again and again. Peter isn't aware of God being at work in this dark hour, but He is. And at the intersection of Peter's failure and Jesus, we see the power of the gospel and God's ability to redeem our failure for good. Let's consider four lessons we learn from Peter's failure.

I. In the gospel God met our failure with Jesus' perfect success

Ironically, God only frees us from being failures when we embrace the fact that we are absolute failures who are in need of Christ's absolute success. We see that when we take a closer look at Peter's failure. Remember, Peter isn't just one of the twelve, he's one of the three who made up Jesus' inner circle, and Peter is the most prominent of those three, the leader among leaders. Peter is the highest profile disciple and his failure is by far the highest profile failure of the disciples (except for Judas - who didn't really fail, he betrayed and turned on Jesus). While Jesus was being tried we don't really know what the other disciples were doing - but we sure know what Peter was doing. He was denying Jesus to a slave girl, he was disowning Jesus with a curse! To make matters worse, Peter's denial of his Lord is recorded in all four gospels. Rather than hide the story under the fold, the Gospel writers all elevate it to a prominent position. The question is, why? How are we to view Peter's failure? Is his abject failure meant to be an abnormality, an epic fail that serves as a warning for us not to do what Peter did? About seven months ago I was shocked to read that a pastor I had met was caught in a police sting soliciting a prostitute. It was a massive moral failure that, I'm sure, left his family and his church devastated. I feel for the victims that his moral failure has hurt so badly, and I can't imagine the fallout and destruction that such a moral failure leaves in its wake. But I have to admit that when I read about these kinds of scandalous failures, I also have this thought: I'm glad it's not me. I'm glad I'm not in that person's shoes. Is Peter's story meant to make us think, "I'm glad that wasn't me! I'm glad I'm not in Peter's shoes"?

I submit to you that it's supposed to have the opposite effect. We should realize that Peter's failure was our failure. Look with me again at verse 32: *Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat.* It sounds like Jesus is talking about Peter only, but the "you" is plural. Satan demanded the opportunity to sift all the disciples. Peter is just the most visible victim of that sifting. Peter's failure was representative of all the disciple's failure, and of our failure as well.

Peter's failure didn't disqualify him as a follower of Jesus, it was what qualified him to be a follower of Jesus. And it is what qualifies us to be followers of Jesus as well. One of the Greek words that means sin is the word hamartia. Hamartia means to have a fatal flaw that is serious enough to bring a person's life down in flames. That's what sin is in all of us: a fatal flaw, a terminal failure that causes us to fall far short of God's holy standard. We might look good compared to other people, but in the light of God's blazing perfection, we all fall short because we have a fatal flaw woven into the very fabric of our being. The Bible calls that fatal flaw sin.

Jesus didn't come into the world to seek and save successful people. He didn't come into the world to lend assistance to people who just needed a helping hand. He came into the world to seek and to save the lost; sinners, people like you and me and Peter who have a fatal flaw, a terminal failure called sin. Peter's story is highlighted, not to humiliate Peter, but to give us hope. Jesus came to carry our failure and shame to Calvary and pay for it as if it was his own failure. When Jesus said "it is finished" it was the greatest cry of success ever uttered by any man. Jesus succeeded in accomplishing what he came to do. It is staggering to think that Jesus successfully carried all our sins and paid in full for every single sin as he hung on the cross. Paul says in Col. 2:14:

He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us; he has taken it away, nailing it to the cross.

Jesus told Peter, "I have prayed for you (singular you), that your faith may not fail." Everything in Peter failed except one thing: his faith in Jesus. And that was only because Jesus had prayed for him. We need to come to Jesus the same way – not with our successes, but with our total spiritual and moral failure – our hamartia, our fatal flaw, and trust with all our hearts in His perfect success in paying for that failure on the cross. The beauty and power of the gospel is that Jesus meets us at the intersection of our failure with his perfect success, and he saves us.

II. God teaches us invaluable life lessons through failure

Jesus told Peter that after he had turned again, to strengthen his brothers. In other words, take the painful lesson you're going to learn Peter, and use it to encourage and strengthen your brothers. And that's exactly what Peter does. In a letter to believers, he will draw from his own experience of being sifted by Satan, and warn believers: *Be sober-minded, be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world. 1 Peter 5:8-9*

And then, remembering how Jesus gave him hope that he would make it through the sifting, Peter gives them the same hope: *And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you.*

Peter has learned a priceless lesson through failure. His arrogance has been tempered by humility. His inflated view of himself has been replaced by a realistic view of who he is and an exalted view of who God is. With the seasoned wisdom of a man who has walked through the fire he can help guide younger believers in their own hard trial.

God uses failure in our lives to teach us lessons that have more to do with the heart than the mind. Success doesn't teach us nearly as much as failure. There's an old poem, I'm slightly adjusting but is, I believe just as true and accurate: *I walked a mile with Success, she chatted all the way. But left me none the wiser, for all she had to say. I walked a mile with Failure, and ne'er a word said she; but oh! The things I learned from her, when Failure walked with me.*

When God has us walk a mile with Failure, it's not because He is teaching us how to be failures in life, He's teaching us important life lessons through that failure. We *need* to walk with failure to learn wisdom and humility and perseverance. It wouldn't be good for us to win every battle, accomplish every great thing we attempt, and master every challenge we face on the first try.

I mentioned earlier that I hate failing and that's because something in me equates failing with being a failure. Maybe you do too. We need to counter that with the truth that failure is absolutely necessary if we're ever going to step out and attempt anything of any significance (and if we never step out and attempt anything of significance, that, in itself, is a failure). Thomas Edison was fond of telling people that he had failed 10,000 times on his way to developing the light bulb. Pixar needs around 12,000 storyboards in order to produce a 90 minute film, however because they are continuously developing and iterating the story and the characters and the scenes, they throw away as much as 88% of the storyboards they produce. That means for every 12,000 storyboards they keep, they throw away over 105,000 storyboards.

When we fail, we can feel like our story is going in the trash, but the truth is that when we give our failures over to God He uses them to teach us invaluable life lessons that help our story to bring more glory to Jesus.

III. God uses our failure to refine us, not define us

Let's pick up the story of Peter's failure in **John 21:15-19**. We don't want to miss the emotional tension in this scene. This is the first time that Peter and Jesus have a one on one since Peter denied knowing the Lord. Jesus is going to confront Peter's failure and bring resolution to the elephant in the room, but look at how he does it. He doesn't reproach Peter; he doesn't even bring up Peter's failure. He *reverses* Peter's three denials with three confessions of love. Yes, in the Greek language we can see that Jesus is probing Peter's depth of love, but the bottom line is Jesus draws three confessions of love out of Peter and repeats three times his commission to Peter to feed and tend the Lord's sheep.

God uses failure to refine us, but not to define us. Peter didn't become known as "Peter the Denier" or "Peter the Disloyal". His failure didn't become the defining point of his life, because Jesus wouldn't allow it to. God uses failure in our lives as a lesson but not as a label.

When I was in Bible school, they held an election for class president and several people ran including a guy that I had gotten to be friends with. One day I came upon this guy and he was really depressed

because he had lost. I don't mean disappointed, I mean he was saying that he felt like a failure, like he was worthless and would never amount to anything. I was really surprised by the weight he was putting on being class president and said, man, you ran for president (I didn't) and you did well. The fact that you lost doesn't label you a loser and failure in life. He wouldn't hear it - he was despondent. As we talked, he told me how his father instilled in him that to fail was to be a failure. Our heavenly Father doesn't do that. He refines us through our failure, but He doesn't define us by our failure.

In the first point I mentioned that we have to embrace the fact that we are absolute failures in need of Christ's absolute success and that is the core of the gospel and the core of who we are - failures apart from Christ. But as we read through the NT we see that when we come to Christ God doesn't continue to label us as losers, sinners, failures, miserable, worthless good for nothings. No, God says we are new creations, saints, beloved children, justified, God's chosen people, God's chosen treasure, the bride of Christ, cleansed, holy, and so forth. These all have to do with our identity - it's who we are in Christ. Paul didn't open his letters with "Paul, an abject failure in Christ's eyes, to all the losers in Ephesus." No, he wrote "Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus...to the saints who are in Ephesus."

God wants to meet you in your failure to refine you, not to define you. Lose the label – God has renamed you. Like Peter He confronts your failure with love and recommissioning, not condemnation. Jesus helped Peter to see that his failure wasn't fatal or final. Jesus didn't say to Peter, "hey, I still love you and forgive you. Let's forget about it and move on." Jesus knew that the problem wasn't that Peter thought Jesus didn't love him. The problem was that Peter knew his own love for Jesus failed big time. Peter still loved Jesus – more than he loved anyone! - but he had his giant failure of love in his face. So Jesus drew that out of Peter until finally (a little frustrated) Peter says, "Lord, you know everything, you know that I love you" and after each profession of love, Jesus reminded Peter he still had a job for him to do, the failure refined him but it didn't sideline him.

Michael Jordan did a commercial where he says, "I've missed 9,000 shots in my career. I've lost almost 300 games. Twenty-six times I've been trusted to take the game-winning shot and I have missed. I've failed over and over and over again in my life." Then he says, "And that's why I succeed." Failure has a powerful refining effect in our lives when we pick up and try again and God uses failure to refine us into men and women who pick up and try again. And again. And again. Jesus tells Peter that the day will come when Peter will die for Jesus. The writer of the gospel John inserts this commentary into the scene: *This he said to show by what kind of death he (Peter) was to glorify God.* If Peter had stood for Jesus in the courtyard and had been killed for his testimony, Peter would have been the one who got the glory. What a guy. What a faithful disciple. When all else fled, Peter stood strong. That's what Peter wanted, but he failed. But Jesus was going to refine him so that it was the power of the Spirit that would enable him to stand for Jesus and die for Jesus and God would get the glory – which is far better.

Whether you're the person who's afraid to step out and do something because you're afraid of failing, or the person who's running and jumping hurdle after hurdle out of fear of failing, let me say something to your heart (and I need to hear this): failing is something we will all do from time to time, but if you're in Christ, it's not something you are. Hear that? You can run the race and even if you knock some hurdles over as you go, it's ok. That doesn't make you a failure. And if you're running breathlessly, maybe you need to slow down. Examine why you're driven to succeed. Examine if you're deathly afraid of failing. It's ok to fail. It's ok to knock some hurdles over, it's even ok to sit some races out. See, when we accept that

failure is a part of life, even a necessary part, but that failure doesn't and shouldn't attach itself to our identity, it frees us to serve God for His glory, rather than either extreme of being paralyzed by fear of failure or driven by fear of failure. Embrace failure and allow God to refine you through it, but know that God doesn't define you by it and you shouldn't either.

IV. God uses our failure to remind us not to compare ourselves to others but follow Jesus

This point is closely related to the previous one – when we fail, especially if we have somehow had the label “failure” attached to us – we can be tempted to compare ourselves to others who, in our eyes, seem so successful. Let's read vv. 20-23.

After talking to Jesus, Peter turns and sees the Apostle John following behind them. And there is this odd exchange, “Lord, what about this man?” In other words, is his life going to go in the same direction? I think there is some underlying tension in this scene as well. Remember, Peter is still raw over how he failed Jesus and that wound is aggravated by seeing John following them. John was the disciple that Jesus loved – there was a special closeness in John and Jesus' relationship - Peter knew that. John was the disciple who reclined with his head near Jesus' chest. He was the one close enough for Peter to ask him to find out who would betray Jesus. John was the one who, at the cross, Jesus turned to and gave the charge over his mother to. John didn't have this emotional baggage that Peter had. And so Peter is concerned about whether John would have the same path that Peter had, or would he get special “non-failure” treatment?

Jesus mildly rebukes him, essentially saying, what does it matter to you what plans I have for him? You follow me in the plans I have for you! Following Jesus doesn't look the same for any of us. The Lord has a path and a plan for each of us to glorify him by and we shouldn't look at someone else and envy how following Jesus looks different for them. The ambition of our lives – and it's good to have ambition – should be to follow Jesus and do what God has called us to do and go where God has called us to go. And then trust that God knows best. Jesus' call is to follow and if he closes one door, trust him to open another. And, while we can all learn from others, don't compare yourself with others. Just follow Jesus.

I believe the Lord Jesus wants to have a one on one with some here. You feel like you're a failure – you wear the label. Jesus wants to walk the beach with you and remind you that he died to rename you. Saint. Beloved. Son/daughter. Chosen. His treasured possession. I believe he wants you to hear his voice in your heart right now, and he's not saying “failure”. He's saying “follow me”. Let's pray.