

Sermon for Sunday, April 13, 1975, by Andrew A. Jumper, D. D., Pastor
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"HOW TO FAIL SUCCESSFULLY"

St. Matthew 26:69-27:5

Text: "And Peter remembered the saying of Jesus, 'Before the cock crows, you will deny me three times.' And he went out and wept bitterly."

St. Matthew 26:75

"And throwing down the pieces of silver in the temple, he departed; and he went and hanged himself." St. Matthew 27:5

Sometimes we get the idea that the Bible is all about success stories. Yet the Bible is replete with stories of failure. As a matter of fact, the theme of the Bible is the theme of failure. Perhaps you never thought of it that way, but the truth is, the Bible begins with a colossal failure. God placed Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden and gave them a command. The future of humanity hung on their obedience to that command--and they failed! As a consequence, all of the misery and suffering of mankind can be traced to that failure. And when we come to the stories of the great patriarchs of the Old Testament, we discover to our amazement that again and again they were failures. When Abraham went to Egypt, he wouldn't admit that Sarai was his wife because he was afraid of the Pharaoh. Jacob fared no better and his very name indicated that he was a cheat and a fraud. When we come to King David, we find that he was a murderer, a thief and an adulterous person.

The New Testament is no better. In our scripture this morning we read the story of two of the disciples and how they failed Jesus. When we come to the history of the early church, we discover more failure. They argued over how to run the community cafeteria; two leading church figures lied to St. Peter; Paul and Barnabas had a falling out. The point to be learned from all of this is that failure is common to all of us Christians. The question that faces us is not whether or not we will fail. The real question is, how will we deal with failure when it comes.

You see, failure can do dreadful things to you. Failure is a threat to our personhood. To fail is to strike at the ego. Such threats create a stress response in us that can be devastating. Imagine a primitive man lying in the sun in front of his cave, daydreaming in the warm afternoon as he digests his meal. Suddenly a shadow falls across him and he looks up to see a predatory carnivore stalking after him. He reacts with a might surge of bodily resources. Adrenal secretions flash into his blood that give him strength in the form of sugar and stored fats for his muscles and brain. Instantly this mobilizes full energy, his pulse is stimulated as are his respiration and blood pressure. His digestive process is turned off at once so no energy is diverted. His coagulation chemistry prepares to resist wounds by clotting his blood. Red cells pour from the spleen into the stepped-up blood circulation to help the respiration system take in more oxygen and throw off carbon dioxide. He is fully prepared to defend himself with club or to flee for safety into his cave. Now, doctors tell us that chemically modern man reacts the same way to threat and stress. But when there is no enemy to fight physically and no place to which one may flee, emotions build up with no adequate target except one's self. If the threat is prolonged, the defense system gradually wears down and the body begins to deteriorate. Failure can do that to a person. In our Scripture for this morning we saw two men reacting to failure. In one case, Peter goes out and weeps bitterly. There is no object or target for the

frustration of his failure but himself and he reacts with anguished tears. Judas handles his failure in even more dramatic terms. In the face of his failure, with no adequate target for his anguish, he throws the thirty pieces of silver at the feet of the Jewish leaders and goes out to vent his emotions on the only available target, himself. The Bible says he hanged himself.

How do you handle the failures that come into your life? One way we can handle guilt is to deny it. We can simply close our eyes to the realities of life--and of ourselves--and pretend it never happened. But such a response forces us into unreality and self-deception. It forces us to push failure down into the unconsciousness where it broods and festers and creates an inner monster that will one day rise up to destroy us. No, denial is a dreadful response to failure that can destroy us. Another response we can make to failure is to blame it on someone else. Most of us, at one time or another, have tried such an approach. "He made me do it," we say. "I'm not to blame--it was my environment, it was the circumstances of my life, it was the fault of any and everyone but myself." Unfortunately, many of our modern psychologists and educators have duped the American public into believing that a man is not responsible for himself. They have tried to convince us that the criminal or the thief or the rapist or the murderer is not to blame, but somehow we are the guilty ones. The wrong-doer is but the helpless victim of his environment and the circumstances of his life. Yet, such a viewpoint means that we have no self-determination. We are not able to control who and what we are or what we become. I for one am unwilling to accept such a definition of humanity. We are responsible ultimately. In the final analysis, each person from within himself, must accept responsibility for who and what he is. And while we need to be aware of the needs and problems of our brothers, in the final analysis, each man must accept responsibility for himself. No, blaming someone else for our sins will not do.

Another way we can handle failure and guilt is to let it defeat us. Elizabeth Barrett had let life defeat her. Unable to cope with life she had retreated to an invalid's bed, clinging to symptoms that defeated her great talent for living. Perhaps subconsciously she wanted to be defeated. That way she did not have to strive, she got special care and attention and no one expected anything of her. Yet, the great talent she had lay buried as long as she let life defeat her.

Yes, how can we handle failure and guilt? How can we fail successfully? There are two things a person must do to fail successfully. First, he must admit his failure. He must accept his guilt. But this step without the second can destroy a man. It can take away his courage and destroy his initiative. The second step is this: he must accept and receive the grace of God. You know, the story of Jesus is called the "good news". That is the word that the New Testament itself uses. It is the good news that God accepts us just as we are. It is the good news that God forgives us.

See how it works! I can dare to admit I am a sinner, that I have done something wrong, that I have failed, that I have made a mistake or have erred. And how can I do that? By the wonderful knowledge that I am forgiven, that Jesus has died to cleanse me of my failures, and that God loves me just as I am. Bruce Larson, in his book "Edge of Adventure", has a wonderful description of King David's behavior when he had rediscovered the amazing grace of God. He writes, "He danced before the Ark in the sight of all the people of Israel. His wife Michal shouted at him, 'Come in; you're making a fool of yourself.' Not only was David dancing, but he was wearing some sort of kilt or short skirt and apparently he had no underpants on. Michal,

the daughter of a king, was outraged and humiliated. 'I can't stop!' David shouted back, continuing to dance wildly before the Ark, celebrating the good news that God forgives and justifies sinners. Having confessed openly his own unrighteousness, David was free to celebrate the grace of God."

Notice three things. First, the fact that we are Christians does not mean we cease to be guilty. It does not mean we cease to make mistakes, to fail, to sin. That is a fact of life. Even St. Paul had to groan in frustration, "The things that I don't want to do are the very things I do." And isn't that true in your life? We don't always know God's will, we don't always do the right thing even when we are trying. We are not always filled with the Spirit.

But note secondly that because we know God's grace, because we know the good news of forgiveness, because we know that God never quits loving us, we don't have to pretend about our sin any more. We can be honest with ourselves about our failures. We don't have to put the blame on anyone else or make ourselves out as the innocent party. No, because we know God's grace we can dance before the Ark without shame. Maybe you never thought of it just this way before, but the man who has to pretend he does no wrong, has no sin, or experiences no failure is a man putting a limit on God's grace. He is saying that God's grace isn't big enough. He is saying that God's grace isn't sufficient and that if he sins after he is a Christian, God's grace can't cover it. And isn't that nonsense? So for us Christians, first, guilt and sin and failure never ceases for us, but secondly, God's grace is always adequate for our sin. The cross is always big enough. And that means thirdly, that we are free to live, we are free to fail successfully. We are free to live boldly because we stand in love and forgiveness.

Let me share with you one experience of how such grace worked in my own life. Some years ago when I was a pastor in west Texas, a group of Presbyterians in a neighboring town 50 miles away, got into a disagreement with their pastor. They were members of a United Presbyterian Church and when they complained to their Presbytery, they were looked upon as troublemakers and malcontents and Presbytery sought to discipline them. One day about 20 of them came to see me and told me of their hurts and problems. They asked if they could join my church. One of the men, with tears in his eyes, said to me, "Dr. Jumper, won't somebody care about us?" Well, this put me in a dreadful dilemma. If I received them as members, gave them aid and comfort when their Presbytery was trying to discipline them, I would create a major breach between my Presbytery and theirs. I would incur the wrath of their leaders and many of my own Presbytery members would feel I was doing wrong. On the other hand, if I failed to show compassion and concern for them I also felt that would be dreadfully wrong. Do you see? No matter what I did I was wrong. What does one do in such a case? Well, if one takes this business of being a Christian seriously, he must act. He is responsible. He cannot duck the duty to respond. So, I prayed and prayed and then I did what I felt God wanted me to do. I had to admit that I might be wrong. My Session and I received those people as members. Over fifty of them came. And then we went to their city and started a new congregation. Today they have a lovely church there with over 300 members. Were we right? I don't know. I could only say to my fellow ministers who were angry with me, "I am sorry. I prayed to know God's will. I did what I thought was right. If I was wrong, please forgive me."

Does that make sense to you? We Christians are not always right, we do not always

do the proper thing, we are often guilty of mistakes and sins, we are not always guided and we make many wrong turns. But we do not have to justify or defend ourselves. No, we can fail because we know that in spite of our failure and sin, we are the forgiven ones. We are the ones who stand in God's Grace that is sufficient for all our sin, our mistakes and errors. Therefore, we can dare to live because we have learned to fail successfully.

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