

Westland Free Methodist Church
"Life Management Series: Failure Management"

November 18, 2007

"There is no doubt in my mind that there are many ways to be a winner, but there is really only one way to be a loser and that is to fail and not look beyond the failure."

Kyle Rote Jr.

How afraid do you get of failing? It sends a chill through the air just talking about it.

My first real ministry training on the art of failure was in Chicago at a Church Growth training session with John Maxwell. John, known for the Church growth Conference in Marion, IN while he pastored in Indiana was by this time pastoring in San Diego was teaching away. It was break time, so he asked for a couple of questions before we ended the session. One guy asked John, "John you speak so candidly about what can work in our churches, and how things have worked for you, have you ever struggled or failed in ministry?" A couple of guys had gotten up for break about that time, and John said, guys you might want to sit down, because this question is going to take awhile. For the next 20-30 minutes, John told us story after story of how he had started something and how it failed. He had a big white wipe board behind him, and he would write down the ministry initiative he started, and how it bombed. By the time he ended far beyond our break time, he had the wipe board full of failed ministry programs. Then he turned to us, and said the most important thing I have heard since in leadership. He said, "the difference between a leader and not, is the one not giving up."

In Leadership magazine, J. Wallace Hamilton states, *"The increase of suicides, alcoholics, and even some forms of nervous breakdowns is evidence that many people are training for success when they should be training for failure. Failure is far more common than success; poverty is more prevalent than wealth; and disappointment is more normal than arrival."*

The real question isn't are you going to fail but it is this: Are you going to fail forward or fail backward? You see, we need to simply readjust our perspective on failure

Let me give you 2 questions. Which one would you choose?

- 1) If the possibility of failure were erased, what would you attempt to achieve? Or
- 2) If your perception of and response to failure were changed, what would you attempt to achieve?

You see failure is imminent. It's going to happen sooner or later.

Take a test with me. There are 2 ways to approach failure. Which list applies to you:

Failing Backwards

- Blaming others
- Repeating the same mistakes
- Expecting Never to fail again

- Expecting to continually fail
- Accepting tradition blindly

Failing Forwards

- Taking Responsibility
- Learning from each mistake
- Knowing that failing is part of the progress

- Maintaining a Positive Attitude
- Challenging Outdated Assumptions

- Being Limited by Past mistakes
- Thinking I am a failure
- Quitting
- Taking new risks
- Believing something didn't work
- Persevering

So let's **Redefine failure and success**: (John Maxwell wrote a book called Failing Forward. In it he lists these 7 facts about failure. I want to use them as our guide today.)

1. **People think Failure is avoidable – It's not.**

Rules for being human: (like Murphys Law)

Rule #1 – You will learn lessons.

Rule #2 – there are no mistakes—only lessons.

Rule #3 – A lesson is repeated until it is learned.

Rule #4 – If you don't learn the easy lessons, they get harder.

Rule #5 – You'll know you've learned your lesson when your actions change.

Peter and James were discussing one day, who would get to sit on the right and left of Jesus in authority. Such arrogance was a clear failure of the disciples who desired power early on, even as they thought Jesus would reclaim Jerusalem and set up a new kingdom, making all things right in Israel. Jesus of course has to rebuke them and show them the rightful place of those who choose Jesus as Lord and Savior. That day they fell short. But in time Jesus knew they would figure out their failure and what it would ultimately lead to.

Failure is not avoidable is it? In fact they are the key to success. Have you failed at something lately? I bet you have. I have too.

2. **People think Failure is an event – It's not.**

Failure is not a destination just like success is not. We need to stop looking at certain things and say they are a success or failure. No one thing is a failure, and no one thing is a success. Both are journeys to meaningful life. Success and failure will be determined in time, but even in light of one person's opinion and perception, success or failure will be seen differently.

Is Barry Bond's homerun record to have an asterisk or not?

I enjoyed 1st grade so much I spent 2 years there. Was I a failure? I continued to struggle with school. Over the years, was I a failure? I graduated HS with a terribly low GPA. Was I a failure? When I entered Greenville College Sarah Ridpath sat across the desk from me, and said, "welcome to GC Randy, you are here on academic probation. You have one semester to pull a 2.0 gpa or higher. Reach that benchmark and you get to stay." I remember the humbling I went through when I went through the remedial class to learn how to learn and study better. I remember one of my good friends teaching me how to write a term paper with footnotes. I remember taking a difficult class in sociology, which ended up giving me my first test. This test had 3 multiple questions per page. It was tricky. I wiped tears from my eyes that day in the middle of the test. Later I saw that I failed that test. Was I a failure then?

You see, I ended up with well over a 2.0 that semester, passed that sociology class, graduated from Greenville, and graduated from Asbury. Do you know how

that happened? Because I did not believe that failure was encompassed in one event. Is failure real? Yes, it is. But's it not one event.

3. People think Failure is objective - It's not.

Matthew tells us in Matthew 14 how Peter walked on water, and then sank because of his lack of faith. Peter saw Jesus walking on the water towards the disciples in the boat, and asked to walk to Jesus. Peter first walked on the waves, but then began to sink when he saw the waves around him. Jesus had to rescue Peter from the waves. Was Peter was a failure? Did Peter fail? Question: How many other disciples do we have on record who walked on water? None, except for Peter. He succeeded for a few moments. Did Peter succeed for a moment, and did he learn from his failure to persevere in faith? .

Although failure is very real, failure is also very subjective. How do we put a label on failure?

Illus. Did you know that for Business Entrepreneurs – it takes an average 3.8 failed ventures for an entrepreneur to succeed, according to Tulane University business professor Lisa Amos.

4. People think Failure is the enemy – It's not.

In Galatians, Paul confronts Peter. Paul says that if Peter's task is to reach the Jews, then Paul's task is to reach the Gentiles, the Greeks. Peter is with some gentiles in Antioch, but when the Jews came near, Peter in respect, so he thought of the circumcised Jews, pulled away from the gentiles. Paul blasts him for this. Of course, Peter humbled himself and found a new place of success in both people groups.

Rick Pitino – *“Failure is good. It's fertilizer. Everything I've learned about coaching I've learned from mistakes.”*

Herbert Brocknow puts failure in perspective: *“The fellow who never makes a mistake takes his orders from one who does.”*

Musicologist, Eloise Ristad says that *“when we give ourselves permission to fail, we at the same time give ourselves permission to excel.”*

Thursday night, Keith told the teens that some people saw Edison fail over a 1000 times to light the light bulb, but instead Edison declares, “no, I just found over a 1000 ways not to light a light bulb.”

5. People think Failure is irreversible – It's not.

When Peter got into the boat with Jesus' help, The disciples, including Peter, said, “Truly you are the Son of God.” Failure is reversible.

It's like the old saying in Texas – *“It doesn't matter how much milk you spill as long as you don't lose your cow.”*

When Michigan lost to Appalaican State, and then to Oregon, now #2 in the nation, Sports Illustrated put it on the cover like this, “Worst loss in NCAA history.” I am not a Michigan fan before I am a MSU fan, but even I was offended at that. Did Michigan let that loss do their season in? No. They went

on to win 8 straight. By the way, that's the difference between MSU and Michigan. Michigan knows how to reverse its failure barometer. MSU doesn't do as good.

6. People think Failure is a stigma – It's not.

I am using Peter today for one important reason. He failed more than any other disciple. But Peter knew something each one of us can learn. Failure is not a stigma. If a person becomes a failure stigma, it's not the failure event's fault.

Near the end of Jesus' life, and as they were already in Jerusalem, Jesus spoke of his imminent death. Peter rebukes Jesus about this. Jesus says to Peter, today before the cock crows you will deny me three times. Later when Jesus was arrested and Peter was within ear shot and eye shot of Jesus, he denied Jesus not once, not twice, but three times to those who were accusing him. It says that Peter went out and wept after hearing the cock crow. The stigma would be there for all eternity. When Jesus needed Peter the most, Peter failed the final exam. If that's not a stigma, I don't know what is.

But Jesus knew then what Peter could not see now. Here's Jesus' formula to success over failure: Our failures are steps to success.

Failure is not a stigma, but giving up on yourself is a stigma. Don't blame failure. It's just the teacher.

7. People think Failure is Final – it's not.

My favorite picture is Peter on the shore of Tiberias. In John 21, we see after all that Peter has been through here he is with Jesus again. The disciples were on their way to fishing, and had been fishing for sometime now. Now, well after the supposed resurrection of Jesus, there Jesus stands on the shore telling the disciples to cast their nets on the other side. John recognizes Jesus and says "It is the Lord". With that Peter dove into the water and couldn't get there fast enough. The rest all come ashore with a new catch of fish. Of course, Jesus is there with a fire, fish already fried with bread, and breakfast ready to be served.

Realize several things about Peter. One, after all his failures, he did not desert the fellowship, like Judas did. Two, Peter had repented of his steps of failure in the past. And three, Peter did not avoid Jesus even now. You see the last time Peter saw Jesus was when he denied him 3 times in the garden where Jesus was arrested.

Let's read one of the most compelling scriptures on success and failure. **John 21: 15-17.**

Are you a failure, or are you just one step away from learning the next step of success. Jesus was the best teacher of that. And still teaching now, isn't he.