

From Failure to Wisdom in the Safety of Forgiveness

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When he was two years old, Robert tried to take a bottle of milk out of the refrigerator. He lost his grip, and it spilled all over the kitchen floor. When his mother came into the kitchen, instead of yelling at him, giving him a lecture, or punishing him, she said, “Robert, I have rarely seen such a huge puddle of milk. Well, the damage has already been done. Would you like to get down and play in the milk for a few minutes before we clean it up?” Indeed, he did.

After a few minutes, his mother said, “You know, Robert, whenever you make a mess like this, eventually you have to clean it up and restore everything to its proper order. So, how would you like to do that? We could use a sponge, a towel, or a mop. Which do you prefer?” He chose the sponge and together they cleaned up the spilled milk.

His mother then said, “You know, what we have here is a failed experiment in how to effectively carry a big milk bottle with two tiny hands. Let’s go out in the back yard and fill the bottle with water and see if you can discover a way to carry it without dropping it.” The little boy learned that if he grasped the bottle at the top near the lip with both hands, he could carry it without dropping it.

What a wonderful lesson: **In a safe environment, mistakes can be turned into learning opportunities.**

What Robert didn’t realize until becoming an adult is that the way his mother treated him when he failed as a two-year-old had a big impact on his willingness to try new things and learn from his mistakes. This attitude, combined with a love of science, led him to become a famous research scientist who made several important medical breakthroughs. Trying something new, failing, learning, and trying again—it’s what scientific experiments are all about.[\[1\]](#)

Failing Jesus

The same is true of the moral life and the life of discipleship. All of us make bad decisions and do things we shouldn’t do. In the language of scripture, we have all sinned, we have all missed the mark.

Even Jesus’ firsts disciples missed the mark. Listen to what happens during the last hours of Jesus’ life as recorded in Mark 14 beginning with verse 17. Pay attention to Jesus’ comments regarding their failure.

When it was evening, he came with the twelve. And when they had taken their places and were eating, Jesus said, “Truly I tell you, **one of you will betray me**, one who is eating with me.” They began to be distressed and to say to him one after another, “Surely, not I?” He said to them, “It is one of the twelve, one who is dipping bread into the bowl with me. For the Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that one by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that one not to have been born.”

While they were eating, he took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to them, and said, “Take; this is my body.” Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, and all of them drank from it. He said to them, “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many. Truly I tell you, I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God.”

When they had sung the hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives. And Jesus said to them, “**You will all become deserters**; for it is written,

‘I will strike the shepherd,
and the sheep will be scattered.’

But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee.” Peter said to him, “Even though all become deserters, I will not.” Jesus said to him, “Truly I tell you, this day, this very night, before the cock crows twice, **you will deny me three times**.” But he said vehemently, “Even though I must die with you, I will not deny you.” And all of them said the same. (Mark 14:17-31, NRSV)

Despite their denials and promises to be faithful to the end, Jesus predicted that all the disciples would fail him. And they did. One would betray, one would deny, and all would become deserters.

Learning from Failure in the Safety of Forgiveness

What is most encouraging to me is that Jesus still invited all of them to join as friends in his final meal and to stay with him until his arrest. It’s like Jesus was saying, “I know that all of you are going to face some terribly difficult situations because of me, the intensity of which will outstrip your burgeoning faith. In your suffering, I know that you will cave to the pressure of sin, but I still love and forgive you. I still consider you friends.” So, he invited them to the table, talked about his own sacrifice for their sins (and the sins of the world), and promised that through their ongoing table fellowship he would continue to be present with them and offer forgiveness. Note what he didn’t say; he didn’t say, “You lousy group of men are going to betray, deny, and desert me, so I’m going to cut you off and find a new, more faithful group of friends.” Rather, knowing they would fail him, he said, “I love you, forgive you, and am going to stick with you.”

And if we keep reading, this is exactly what Jesus does. Most of you know the story. He is executed by the Romans, all the disciples fail him (as he predicted), and when he is raised from the dead and encounters them again for the first time, he is gracious. Can you imagine how the

disciples must have felt in that first encounter? They knew what they had done a couple days earlier, and now they must look him in the eyes *knowing* what they did, and knowing that he knew what they did. But Jesus didn't scold them, shame them, give them a lecture, or kick them to the curb for a new group of followers. Rather, he says, "I know you were in a difficult spot and failed me, but I have compassion for you and forgive you. If you will learn from your mistakes, then you can still play an essential role in my Father's great rescue mission of this world."

Did you get that? Jesus didn't just forgive them, he called them to recommit and said, "You are still useful. Indeed, because of what you have been through, you may be *more* useful insofar as you can uniquely connect with others who share similar struggles."

And this is exactly what Jesus does for us. He knows that we will fail him, especially when we are new in our faith, when we suffer, or when the challenges are fierce. But like Robert's mother mentioned above, he gives us the safety of forgiveness, so we can learn from our mistakes, get better, and use what we have learned to help advance his mission in unique ways.

And forgiveness is crucial, because we cannot reflect on our mistakes and learn important lessons if we are stuck in guilt and shame. Guilt, shame, and self-recrimination rob us of our power to move forward in useful ways. Whereas forgiveness sets us free to ask important questions that help turn our mistakes into learning opportunities.

Questions like: What led up to my failure? What was going on in my life that made me vulnerable? What was the trigger that sent me over the edge? What could I have done to better prepare, to head it off at the pass, to diminish the intensity of the temptation instead of increasing it? How did my failure to properly deal with one temptation lead to others that were worse? What were the natural consequences for me and the people around me? What will this sin cost me? What can I learn so as not to fall into the same sin again? Now that I've messed-up, how can I make amends and move forward in ways that will make reconciliation more likely? How can I turn this mistake into an opportunity to get wiser, stronger, and more faithful? These are the kinds of questions that turn failures into learning opportunities that help us become better followers of Jesus.

How Failure Uniquely Equips Us to Help Others

When we truly take responsibility for our failures, confess and sincerely seek forgiveness, let go of guilt and shame, critically reflect on our sin, and learn important lessons, then it not only benefits us but also others. Because now God can use us for very special purposes in his rescue mission of the world. Think about all the special ministries of the church that help bring healing to people that are hurting: divorce recovery groups led by people who have gone through divorce, addiction recovery groups led by recovering addicts, prison ministry led by ex-cons. It's not that you must be divorced to help divorced people, or a recovering addict to help other addicts, or ex-cons to help those in prison, because we can all bear testimony to God's forgiveness and encourage others in their healing. But we all know that it's easier to connect

with someone who has been through what we are going through. They seem to have more credibility and wisdom that uniquely applies to your situation. So, if you fail, receive forgiveness, learn important lessons, and rebuild your life, then you become particularly useful to God in helping others going through the same thing. It just might turn out that your mistake is what not only what was necessary for your transformation but also the transformation of someone else.

Implicating the Church

What is true of individuals is also true of the church since the church is full of people who struggle with sin. As is clearly illustrated by the Book of Revelation, entire churches, like individuals, can be unfaithful. We lose sight of our mission and turn inward and become self-serving. Instead of following Jesus into the future and partnering with him in new ministries, we get stuck reminiscing about the past and are blinded by a yearning for the good old days. Instead of asking how we can serve the mission of Jesus through the ministries of the church, we ask how the church can serve our personal preferences and agendas. Instead of producing fruitful ministries in God's great rescue mission of the world, we become consumers of religious goods asking, "What have you done for me lately?" Instead of being gracious, loving, and hopefully, we become critical, negative, and pessimistic. In this way, we fail not only Jesus but also each other. When we fail each other, we also fail all those in our community that desperately need us to practice what we preach, so they too can come to know Jesus as Lord and Savior. So, just as individuals need to confess their sin, let go of guilt and shame, deeply reflect on their failure, learn important lessons, and recommit to serving God's great rescue of the world, the church needs to do the same—repeatedly.

Challenge

In conclusion, we all sin and fall short of God's glory, individually and as a church. But Jesus offers forgiveness and the opportunity to convert our sin into wisdom, wisdom that will uniquely equip us to help others in God's rescue mission of the world. So, confess your sins, receive forgiveness, leave shame and guilt behind, and take some time to deeply reflect on your failures without self-recrimination to learn how to be more faithful to God and helpful to others.

Prayer

Gracious God, forgive me of my sin and help me to forgive myself. Deliver me from guilt and shame, and teach me whatever lessons I need to learn to be a more faithful follower of Jesus and a healing voice for others.