

# life groups discussion guide

## 11.27.16 – weakness produces strength



*“So if I stand let me stand on the promise that You will pull me through  
And if I can’t, let me fall on the grace that first brought me to You.”*

— Rich Mullins

*“All the adversity I’ve had in my life, all my troubles and obstacles, have strengthened me...  
You may not realize it when it happens, but a kick in the teeth may be the best thing in the world for you.”*

— Walt Disney

There’s a somewhat familiar idea that has crept into pop culture that goes like this: Failure isn’t an option. You’ve probably heard it barked out in some action movie or in an ad campaign for a sporting goods manufacturer. The problem is that this idea is just not true. Not only is failure indeed an option, I’d go as far as to say it’s almost assured to some degree. As a matter of fact, one of the most memorable ad campaigns by a sports manufacturer came from Nike and featured arguably the greatest basketball player ever, Michael Jordan, musing about the failures he’s experienced as a professional basketball player. In an understated voice-over, Jordan says:

*I’ve missed more than 9000 shots in my career. I’ve lost almost 300 games. 26 times, I’ve been trusted to take the game winning shot and missed. I’ve failed over and over and over again in my life. And that is why I succeed.*

On the one hand, it’s almost shocking to hear one of the greatest athletes to ever live lean into, and even embrace failure in that way. On the other hand, as the father of a son who plays basketball, I am grateful to Nike for that commercial as it has provided me a fantastic tool for teaching my son some lessons about basketball. But I have also used the same commercial to teach some valuable spiritual truths as well. For the same idea of connecting our successes to the failures that we have experienced, lived through, and moved on from is relevant to any part of life, is it not? And failure IS inevitable if we live long enough. The gospel itself even seems to tip it’s hat to that idea as it tells us that Jesus paid the price for our sins – past, present and future. The fact that we will commit sins AFTER we come to Christ for salvation is built right into the gospel message.

Most of us don’t want to think in those terms, but Scripture demonstrates this idea both in Paul’s struggle with sin (more on this in a moment), and most certainly in the big fisherman (with the big mouth), Simon Peter. Remember Peter’s reaction when it was suggested that he would let Jesus down. Peter gets belligerent and doubles down on his “failure isn’t an option” attitude by demanding: “Jesus, even if you die tonight, I’ll be by your side.”

Q :: We all think of Judas when we think about someone betraying Jesus, but there are multiple betrayals of Jesus in Scripture . . . Judas, Peter (his 3 denials), and the 9 other disciples who, along with Peter and Judas, were nowhere to be found when Jesus was hanging on the cross – only John was there (the only one of his closest friends who did not betray Jesus in some capacity). Compare and contrast these various betrayals?

Q :: Peter couldn’t fathom ever being in a position where he would betray Jesus – what can we learn from this regarding our own walk with the Lord?

Q :: Considering the quote above from Walt Disney, and the content of the Michael Jordan commercial, have you ever had a kick in the teeth that turned out to be a blessing after all, or failures that paved the road to success?

Q :: Scott talked about Satan’s desire to separate us from Christ – to hurt us and all who might look up to us. I had a trusted brother in Christ tell me this past week “you do have a target on your back.” He was speaking in spiritual terms to let me know that I was on the devil’s radar, and that I was the focus of his efforts.

Explain how should the reality of spiritual warfare impact how we view our own failures or weaknesses?

Many Christians like to hang their spiritual hat on Philippians 4:13, which proclaims that “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.” Yet, the Apostle Paul goes well out of his way in his second letter to the Corinthians to make a point that seems to almost run counter to the proclamation from his letter to the Philippians. In 2 Corinthians, verse 30 of chapter 11 he states:

“If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness.”

...and in 12:5 – “I will not boast about myself, except about my weaknesses.”

...and finally in 12:9-10 – “I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.”

Q :: Coming off of the Thanksgiving holiday, I’m going to venture a guess that as we were all sitting around our respective tables, enjoying conversation with family members, no one said “Hey, let’s go around the table and everyone share the weaknesses you have that you’re thankful for!” Why do you think it is that we seem to have a vastly different view of our weaknesses than the Apostle Paul did of his own?

Q :: How do we reconcile Paul’s claim that he can do all things through Christ with his repetitive proclamations that he boasted in his own weaknesses, as the two ideas seem opposed to one another?

Q :: How do we find **strength** in our weaknesses? Is it obvious, or is it something somewhat hidden that we must unearth? What might be some barriers to tapping into it?

While a careful study of what Paul writes is key to understanding Scripture here, I believe it’s also important to note what Paul does **NOT** say. While Paul notes three times that there are weaknesses in his life that are very obvious to him, and about which he will gladly boast, he never makes it clear specifically what these weaknesses are. We see the same thing in his letter to the Roman church. In Romans 7 Paul famously writes:

*I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good. As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me. For I know that good itself does not dwell in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing. (verses 15-19)*

Paul is very clear that he still struggles with sin. However, theologians are left to ponder exactly what that struggle was, as Paul never tells us. — Is it possible that the world might need to know that, as Christians, we have weaknesses and sinful leanings that we have not yet overcome, but may not necessarily need to know the gory details of it all?

Q :: How might Paul’s lack of specifics regarding his weaknesses and sin struggle benefit us as believers?

Q :: Explain how that vulnerable level of transparency about our own weaknesses or failures we still experience might impact the gospel message as it is shared with those who don’t know Christ?

Paul’s view of weaknesses (that they are essential to experience the strength of Jesus made manifest in us) is admittedly hard for me to fully embrace. I see my weaknesses as things that pull me away from God – but Paul seems to be telling me exactly the opposite. SO difficult to change my thinking on this! I suppose this Thanksgiving season that I can at least say I am thankful that God works in my weakness to produce strength, because I sure have plenty of weakness for Him to work with! — Happy Thanksgiving Everyone!