

Recovering from Failure

John 21:13-19

Intro

Becky Pippert is a global conference speaker, evangelist and author of many books. One time she attended two very different events on the same day: a graduate-level psychology class at Harvard University and a Christian Bible study adjacent to Harvard. She offered the following observations on how the two groups addressed (or failed to address) their failures, problems, and sins:

First, the students [in the graduate-level psychology class] were extraordinarily open and candid about their problems. It wasn't uncommon to hear them say, "I'm angry," "I'm afraid," "I have failed" Their admission of their problems was the opposite of denial. Second, their openness about their problems was matched only by their uncertainty about where to find resources to overcome them. Having confessed, for example, their inability to forgive someone who had hurt them, [they had no idea how to] resolve the problem by forgiving and being kind and generous instead of petty and vindictive.

One day after the class, I dropped in on a Bible study group in Cambridge, next to Harvard. The contrast was striking. No one spoke openly about his or her problems. There was a lot of talk about God's answers and promises, but very little about the participants and the problems they faced. The closest thing to an admission of sin or a personal problem was a reference to someone who was "struggling and needs prayer."

The first group [the psychology class] seemed to have all the problems and no answers; the second group [the Bible study] had all the answers and no problems. (Source: Rebecca Pippert, *Hope Has Its Reasons* (InterVarsity Press, 2001, pp. 31-32).

Many Christians have a hard time admitting their failures, problems and struggles with sin. We put on this spiritual exterior that everything is going well but we struggle with sin and spiritual failure. Surprisingly, the Bible contains a "museum of failed people." The Gospels record the spiritual failures of the disciples. Thankfully, they also record Christ's willingness to encourage and challenge his flawed disciples. We tend to cover up our heroes' failures; and we're even more likely to gloss over our own faults. Instead, the Gospels allow us to see the disciples' failures—and most of those stories came from the disciples themselves. This honesty provides encouragement to us when we feel like saying, "Is that what I did, and I consider myself a *Christian*?" Our security is in Christ who continues to love us even when we stumble and fail.

One of those disciples who failed big time and felt like giving up was the Apostle Simon Peter. I like Simon Peter because I can identify with him in his human nature and vulnerability. Let's look at John's Gospel chapter 21.

Setting

This was the third time Jesus manifested himself to the disciples after his resurrection. John chapter 21 practically deals with Simon Peter's restoration.

Peter's Failure

Peter is discouraged, confused and at a loss for what to do next with his life. What was going through his mind? Christ was alive but he had let him down by denying that he ever knew him three times. He probably felt like a failure and thoughts of “what’s the use, I’m a loser. Does Jesus still want to use me as a disciple after I have failed him miserably?”

Peter perhaps was in despair and was discouraged because he let down his Master.

John 21:3

Peter says, “*I’m going out to fish.*”

In this context we learn that Peter and a few of the disciples return to their former life of fishing. It seems Peter had lost hope of serving his Master and returns to the old life he knows best which is fishing. Peter seems to be forgetting about Jesus’ call to be a fisher of men (Matt. 4:19), which was given at this very place in John 21.

It seems that everything that Peter and Jesus had experienced together, all their joys and hardships, have been counted as loss by Peter because of his triple denial. His actions suggest that the only option he had was to return to his former life, a fisherman.

Thinking he had forfeited what he had spent the last three years following Jesus, he goes back to fishing.

Remember when Peter said he would give up his life for Jesus? In Luke 22 we read, “*Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift all of you as wheat.*”³² *But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers.*”

³³ *But he replied, “Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death.”*

³⁴ *Jesus answered, “I tell you, Peter, before the rooster crows today, you will deny three times that you know me.”* (Luke 22:31-34).

It seems Peter gave up the life of serving Christ. Perhaps he said to himself many times, “I failed the Lord, what’s the use. I am not worthy to follow him. I have made a blunder and I might as well give up.”

Have you ever felt like that? A failure, a disappointment to the Lord and feel like going back to the old life? “Might as well give up. What’s the use?”

Those are honest feelings but the Lord sees differently. Our problem is that we are too circumstantial. We sometimes focus on the current situation and don’t see the full picture.

You see, the Lord isn’t finished with our lives yet. Our life is a process and a work in progress.

Philippians 1:6 says, “*Being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on until the day of Christ.*” God who started this great work in you and me will keep at it and bring it to a flourishing finish on the very day Christ appears.

The Lord doesn’t focus on our failures BUT our POTENTIAL!

After the disciples spent time trying to catch fish with no results, Jesus is on the shore BBQing some fish. He tells them from the shore in the near distance to cast the nets on right side. They did what he had said and they caught so many fish that they were unable to haul in the net.

Then a little later they recognized that it was Jesus. Simon Peter gets out of the boat and he wades through the water to get to Jesus. Later the others join them for a meal.

The Lord's care and love

John 21:15

When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "*Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?*" "*Yes, Lord,*" he said, "*you know that I love you.*" Jesus said, "*Feed my lambs.*"

What did Jesus mean by "*do you love me more than these?*" What are the "these?"

Could he have meant: "Do you love me more than your companions?" – referring to the disciples.

Could he have meant: "Do you love me more than these things that constitute your livelihood?" – like the boats, the nets and the fish?

Christ's question was one which probed the deepest motives of Peter's heart.

What are the motives of your heart toward Christ? Do you love him more than these? Your material possessions, making more money, your friends, your entertainment and computer games or whatever occupies your time, energy and resources?

In Matthew 6:21 Jesus said, "*For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.*"

Also note that Jesus never brings up the 3 denials that Peter had made. He doesn't bring up the past or the failure. Jesus knew that Peter had wept bitterly and had repented over his sin of denying his Lord (Luke 22:61-62). The Lord not only forgives but he doesn't hold our sin and failure against us.

I like what it says in Isaiah 43:18-19, "*Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. Behold, I am doing a new thing!*"

John 21:15-17

Twice Jesus asked Peter: "Do you love me sacrificially?" That word agape here means "Do you love me sacrificially? Remember Peter once said to Jesus before His crucifixion that he was ready to go with Him to prison and to die (Luke 22:33).

But Peter now is being truthful. Instead of replying that he loved Jesus sacrificially, agape, Peter responds "Lord I am very fond of you." The word used here is *philos* which means a friendship kind of love.

Peter could not profess the deep love for Christ which is implicit in the word that Jesus used in His question.

The third time Jesus asks Peter, "Do you love me" Jesus uses *philos*. In other words, "Peter, are you very fond of me?"

Peter becomes sad and says, "Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you."

Later Jesus explains to Peter that he would die sacrificially for Him (John 21:18-19). In the end Peter will love Jesus to the point of laying down his life because of his love for Jesus.

You see, Peter felt he was a failure, but Jesus reinstates him not just to be a fisher of men but a pastor and leader of the body of believers.

The Lord commissions him to a great responsibility – take care of the believers, the church.

Conclusion

When we have failed the Lord He wants to restore us back to himself and give us an opportunity to serve Him.

Do you love Him? Do you love Him even when you know that you have failed Him?

The main point that the Lord was focussing on, above all was “DO YOU LOVE ME?” He desires a restored relationship of love.

Peter is an encouragement to me because in spite of his failures and weakness Jesus focuses on his potential, because He knew where Peter’s heart was.

The Lord does not focus on our failures and weakness like we do BUT He focuses on our potential. It’s about our potential for Him and what we can do through His love, His grace and power.

Remember, Isaiah 43:18-19? The Lord says, *“Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. Behold, I am doing a new thing!”*

When we fail at times, the Lord desires one thing above all, “Do you love me?” “Then serve me.”